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Thursday 5 September 2024

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Scottish Parliament

Thursday 5 September 2024

[The Presiding Officer opened the meeting at 11:40]

General Question Time

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone):

The first item of business is general question time. In order to get in as many members as possible, I would be grateful for succinct questions, and answers to match.

Police Scotland (Meetings)

1. **Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con):** To ask the Scottish Government when the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs last met with the chief constable of Police Scotland. (S6O-03677)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): I regularly meet the chief constable and other members of Police Scotland's executive team. My most recent meeting was on 20 August. Although the chief constable is accountable to the Scottish Police Authority, our meetings provide an opportunity to focus on matters of strategic importance and the key priorities for policing.

Craig Hoy: The cabinet secretary will be aware of a spike in antisocial behaviour across the bus network in Scotland. In East Lothian, that has included young people lobbing rocks at buses and assaults on passengers. Last week, a pregnant woman was allegedly pushed off a bench while waiting at a bus stop in Tranent. She was left bleeding and in pain and, tragically, after waiting in an ambulance, she later miscarried. Her husband has appealed to parents and family members to speak to young people and to

"remind them everyday how to respect people and behave in public places."

I therefore ask the cabinet secretary what discussions she has had with Police Scotland about policing on the bus network, particularly since the introduction of free bus travel for under-22s. Will she join me in calling for a policy of zero tolerance of antisocial behaviour on Scotland's bus network?

Angela Constance: The circumstances that Craig Hoy has narrated are truly shocking. We should be thankful that the vast majority of our young people are people to be proud of, and are excellent citizens and contributors to, the country in which we live.

I reassure Mr Hoy that I and the Minister for Victims and Community Safety, as well as our ministerial colleagues in transport, are very much engaged in the issue. He might wish to look at the programme for government, where we talk about the on-going work on violence reduction and the actions that will be taken to tackle antisocial behaviour.

Mr Hoy is right to suggest that people who work on our bus and other public transport networks should not have to put up with any kind of deplorable or violent behaviour.

Audrey Nicoll (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Can the cabinet secretary provide an update on recruitment plans that the chief constable has with regard to increasing police officer numbers?

Angela Constance: I am pleased to confirm that, this year, Police Scotland is set to take on more recruits than at any time since its inception in 2013. Since March, Police Scotland has welcomed around 680 new officers and, since the beginning of 2023, has welcomed more than 1,280 new recruits. Police Scotland has plans for further intakes throughout the year, with the chief constable confirming that our budget settlement will enable Police Scotland to recruit enough officers to increase numbers back to the region of 16,500 to 16,600 over the course of this financial year.

Derelict Buildings

2. **Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to support communities to bring derelict buildings back into use as houses. (S6O-03678)

The Minister for Housing (Paul McLennan): The Scottish Government has put in place an enabling policy framework, including national planning framework 4, which supports prioritising sites allocated for housing development and local development plans and encourages the reuse of brownfield, vacant and derelict land and empty buildings. Support is also available for viable projects through a variety of mechanisms, such as the rural and islands housing fund. Of course, it is for each local authority to determine its housing strategy and implementation with regard to the affordable housing supply programme.

Emma Roddick: Recently, I was in Raasay, discussing the massive impact of six new homes being built in the community. However, although the population is currently around 200, it is estimated that there are already enough homes in Raasay to support up to 500 people; they are just not being used as homes, and 46 per cent of them are empty.

Building new houses, especially in rural and island areas, can be cheaper than repairing and retrofitting, and lots of depopulating areas have significant waiting lists for housing and a significant presence on Airbnb. What more will be done to support rural and island housing providers to buy back, repair and retrofit existing homes?

Paul McLennan: I have had the pleasure of meeting representatives of the Raasay Development Trust twice online to discuss its carbon neutral island project, as well as its broader work. Officials continue to work closely with the trust.

I mentioned the rural and islands housing fund earlier, and the affordable housing plans in Raasay have been embedded, with an insistence that not just the housing situation but the energy efficiency of the current stock improves. I commend the trust on the work that it has been doing, and I am happy to discuss the issue further with Ms Roddick.

Benefits Reductions

3. **Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government how much it has spent on mitigating any United Kingdom Government reductions to UK-wide benefits since 2019. (S6O-03679)

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): Since 2019, we have invested £750 million mitigating the impacts of UK Government policies such as the harmful bedroom tax and benefit cap, as well as shortfalls in local housing allowance rates. That includes almost £134 million this year through activities such as the discretionary housing payments and the Scottish welfare fund. That money could fund around 2,000 teachers or band 5 nurses each year, or it could fund further ambitious anti-poverty measures such as our game-changing Scottish child payment.

Christine Grahame: That brings home the costs of being in the union and under the UK economy.

I ask the cabinet secretary to focus on the bedroom tax, or spare-room tax, which we mitigate. Can she tell me how many homes are helped by the Scottish Government paying it, so that households do not have to meet it themselves?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Christine Grahame raises a very important point. It might, perhaps, be assumed that the bedroom tax has been scrapped, but it was not scrapped under the previous Conservative Government, and there have certainly been no announcements that

Labour will do anything like taking such a measure.

We remain committed to mitigating the bedroom tax in full. That helps 92,000 households in Scotland to sustain their tenancies, which is an important aspect of our anti-poverty and housing policies.

Suicide Statistics

4. **Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking in light of the most recent annual update on suicide statistics showing that people living in Scotland's most deprived areas are 2.5 times more likely to die by suicide than those living in the least deprived areas. (S6O-03680)

The Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport (Maree Todd): Every life lost to suicide is an absolute tragedy, and my condolences go out to the families and communities who are behind those numbers.

Tackling the causes and effects of poverty is a key Government mission, and it is central to the ambitious programme of work that is being taken forward across government and within communities under our joint Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities suicide prevention strategy.

We are focused on reducing deaths by suicide while tackling inequalities and supporting deprived and marginalised groups who are at greater risk. Alongside our social campaign, increased peer support and targeted programmes supporting communities are critical. Since 2021 we have awarded nearly 5,000 grants to local projects, totalling £66 million, through our communities mental health and wellbeing fund for adults.

Alex Rowley: I agree that behind all those deaths is a person, their family, their friends and their loved ones—and a lot of heartbreak. When will the Scottish Government be reporting on the impact of the 2023-24 priorities in the suicide action plan? Does the minister agree that we must understand the impact of those plans and strategies if we are to move forward, and if we are to try to reduce the number of suicides in Scotland?

Maree Todd: Just last month we had the first meeting of the leadership board for the mental health and wellbeing plan. I am more than happy to write to Alex Rowley to update him on the work that is on-going and on how the plan is likely to be implemented. The member will know that the suicide implementation plan will be carried out over a period of 10 years. Although there is currently a focus on the early stages of that plan, it is a long-term plan. I am happy to write to the

member with more details about how we will keep Parliament aware of how the plan is progressing.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): As the minister said, every life lost to suicide is a huge tragedy. My thoughts are with all those who are affected—as, I know, are those of members across the chamber.

Will the minister provide an update on the Scottish Government's creating hope together year 2 delivery plan, which was published in July this year—in particular, the focus on strengthening Scotland's awareness and responsiveness to suicide and people who are suicidal?

Maree Todd: The two-year delivery plan builds on the considerable progress that was made during 2023-24. We are proud of the difference that we are making by improving suicide awareness, increasing the availability of peer support across our communities and using clinical evidence and our time, space and compassion approach to drive improvements in statutory services.

With continued focus on groups that are at risk of suicide, many of the actions are designed to reach and support people who are impacted by discrimination, stigma and the wider social determinants of suicide. Work is under way on expanding the campaign and learning activities, growing our social movement and engaging new audiences. We are improving responses that people receive in unscheduled care settings, such as accident and emergency departments. We are also developing a new portal to ensure that people who feel suicidal know where to go for help.

I am happy to update Bill Kidd in writing with the full suite of actions that we are taking, as was mentioned to Alex Rowley.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Organisations such as the men's sheds and Andy's Man Club in my region play vital roles in eliminating the stigma surrounding mental health, and in creating judgment-free confidential spaces where men can be open about the storms in their lives. What more can be done to ensure that those important organisations can carry on the work that is desperately needed?

Maree Todd: I absolutely agree on the point about stigma. It is a challenge for all of us and one that all of us share. Stigma prevents people from accessing the help to which they are entitled and to which they have a right, so work to tackle it is vital.

Men's sheds have had an assurance of funding from another portfolio in the Government. We have also contributed through a number of different programmes. We have invested in the Sam's cafe project, Andy's Man Club, the

wellbeing on wheels service and the roll-out of our distress brief intervention programme. We are investing in a suite of other measures, as well as in men's sheds.

The Presiding Officer: Question 5 was not lodged.

Shoplifting

6. Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what its response is to the reported significant increase in shoplifting recorded in Scotland. (S6O-03682)

The Minister for Victims and Community Safety (Siobhian Brown): The Scottish Government absolutely recognises the disruption and harm to businesses from theft and other antisocial behaviour. Police Scotland and partners are taking action to tackle and reduce it.

We continue to support the innovative Scottish partnership against acquisitive crime—SPAACE—strategy. The partnership is led by Police Scotland working with retailers and other organisations—including Retailers Against Crime and Neighbourhood Watch Scotland—and focuses on prevention, deterrence and, where appropriate, enforcement. The strategy seeks to minimise opportunities for acquisitive crime, to protect individuals and businesses and to deliver clear advice and guidance for prevention.

Furthermore, each local area has a local police plan, which has been refreshed for 2023 to 2026. Many of those plans include specific activities that focus on acquisitive crime and engagement with partners and stakeholders, which focuses on addressing retailers' concerns at a local level.

Sharon Dowey: Shoplifting crimes across Scotland saw a dramatic 34 per cent increase between June 2023 and June 2024, with a 40 per cent rise in East Ayrshire and a 22 per cent rise in South Ayrshire. Those figures are only for crimes that are recorded.

Retailers are facing attacks on their livelihoods. With officer numbers at their lowest since the Scottish National Party came into power, response times are said to be unsatisfactory or significantly delayed. It is clear that the current approach is simply not working, with a high percentage of retailers saying that they also face violence and abuse. What specific steps is the Scottish Government taking to support retailers and improve police response times to better protect our local communities?

Siobhian Brown: The budget for police funding, even in these extremely challenging times, is £1.55 billion, which is an increase of £92.7 million. The chief constable has confirmed that Scottish

Government investment will enable Police Scotland to recruit and increase police numbers.

Earlier this year, I met the retail industry leadership group and the Scottish Retail Consortium, which raised concerns about antisocial behaviour and an increase in theft. It may be interesting for the member to find out about an initiative that Police Scotland is piloting in Fife, where Police Scotland is coming together with partners and information technology providers to help to develop a platform that allows staff in stores to send details of crimes direct to Police Scotland. I hope that that initiative will be rolled out across Scotland.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a member of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which is the shop workers union.

In 2016, USDAW's freedom from fear survey found that 2 per cent of shop workers suffered violence. By 2023, that had risen to 18 per cent. Shoplifting is a key trigger for that. The minister mentioned information sharing; what steps can be taken to spread that across the country? Although we understand that the police cannot attend every incident, it is important to gather evidence so that those who repeatedly carry out such crimes are brought to book, prosecuted and punished for crimes that, ultimately, end up being violent, when shop workers suffer as a result.

Siobhian Brown: As well as the SPAACE initiative with Police Scotland, it is important to recognise some of the good collaborative work that is happening across Scotland. I have visited several projects in Stirling and Inverclyde, where local authorities are coming together with Police Scotland, education providers and local businesses to tackle issues. It is important to reiterate the importance of local police plans.

Scottish Police Authority Budget

7. Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on any steps that it is taking to ensure that any increases in the Scottish Police Authority resource budget continue to support further police recruitment, in light of the challenging financial circumstances as a result of the United Kingdom Government's proposed financial settlement. (S6O-03683)

The Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs (Angela Constance): As has been made clear this week, following the UK chancellor's July statement, the Scottish Government continues to face the most challenging financial situation since devolution. Despite the UK Government's cuts to our budget, we have provided Police Scotland with

record funding of £1.55 billion this year, which is an increase of £92.7 million; £75.7 million of that is for resource, which allows Police Scotland to increase its officer numbers.

Police Scotland indicated that there were about 16,400 officers at the beginning of August, and more than 680 new officers have been recruited since March. I am pleased to say that the police will take on more recruits this year than at any time since 2013.

Rona Mackay: Although it is welcome that the Scottish National Party Government will do everything that it can to protect front-line services and the public from the Westminster attack on Scotland's public spending, will the cabinet secretary expand on the potential impact that the Labour Government's decision to stick to the Tories' fiscal rules will have on delivering a fit-for-purpose Police Scotland service in the long term?

Angela Constance: In the face of the financial challenges, the Government has made it clear that we will support people where that is needed most, including in our public services, such as policing. As we know, all roads lead to Westminster, and we have been told that things will only get worse. We need the UK Government to invest so that we can get our proportionate share. If it cuts, we will feel the brunt of that.

The Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I am conscious that a lot of conversation is taking place across the chamber. I would be grateful if members focused on the cabinet secretary's response.

Angela Constance: I conclude by saying that Labour austerity is as damaging as Tory austerity. This Government continues to call on the UK Government to invest in public services and crucial capital infrastructure.

General Practitioner Contract

8. Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it plans to take any action in relation to reported concerns regarding how the 2018 GP contract is working in the Highlands and Islands. (S6O-03684)

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care (Neil Gray): Under the 2018 GP contract, health boards and integration authorities are responsible for establishing and maintaining multidisciplinary teams, working closely with their local GP representatives and communities. In doing that, it is fundamental that those services meet the needs of local patients—none more so than in our rural and island communities. Although we have made good progress on implementation nationally, we know that implementation gaps and challenges remain. We continue to work with all

partners that are involved in implementing the contract to further understand and tackle on-going challenges, including in the Highlands and Islands.

Edward Mountain: It is absolutely clear that, as a result of the 2018 GP contract, there are fewer GPs and fewer independent GP surgeries in the Highlands, and patients are having to travel hundreds of miles for immunisations. Getting primary care right is critical to avoiding expensive secondary care. Given that the contract is failing in the Highlands, will the Scottish Government undertake to review, and ultimately replace, the contract, as it is not working?

Neil Gray: I agree with Edward Mountain that having strong and sustainable primary care services is critically important to avoiding people's ill health escalating and their moving into more expensive and problematic secondary care services. That is why we are investing in the likes of the Scottish graduate entry medicine programme, so that more rural GPs come through the system, and why we are investing, through the contract, in multidisciplinary teams to ensure that we have a more sustainable general practice position, including in areas in the Highlands and Islands.

I saw some of that in action over the summer, when I visited the likes of the Western Isles and Islay, where I saw for myself the impact that the multidisciplinary teams are having. I would be happy to discuss that further with Edward Mountain.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes general question time.

First Minister's Question Time

12:01

Child Poverty

1. Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Yesterday, John Swinney said that eradicating child poverty would be his Government's top priority. However, since his statement, we have heard the following.

Fiona King of Save the Children said:

"The reality is there is nothing in this programme for government that truly shifts the dial on child poverty."

Dr Lindsey MacDonald of Magic Breakfast said:

"Far from a manifesto on the eradication of child poverty, this plan will struggle to make a significant dent in the child poverty crisis that Scotland faces."

Mary Glasgow, chief executive of Children 1st, said that the charity was

"deeply concerned that the drastic cuts to public spending will throw many children and families already in crisis over the edge."

So, who is right: John Swinney or the growing list of experts who say that his programme will fail to tackle child poverty?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I recognise the enormity of the challenge that we face on child poverty; that is why it is my Government's central mission to eradicate child poverty. The reason why child poverty levels are so high is that Scotland has suffered from 14 years of Conservative austerity and welfare cuts that have forced families into poverty. That has resulted in the Scottish Government taking steps to spend more than £400 million on measures such as the Scottish child payment, which, along with our other measures, is keeping 100,000 children out of poverty.

I respect all the organisations and individuals that Douglas Ross raised with me. Those are people who care deeply about the eradication of poverty, as do I. I think that they would accept that child poverty has been made the crisis that it is in our country today because of the actions for which Douglas Ross voted when he supported the Conservative Government in the House of Commons.

Douglas Ross: John Swinney says that he respects and cares deeply about those experts. However, they were not speaking about previous decisions of the UK Government or current decisions of the Labour Government—they were commenting on his programme for government and, specifically, on the lack of action within it to tackle child poverty.

If the First Minister will not listen to those experts, perhaps John Swinney will listen to John Swinney. When he was Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, he announced the policy of free school meals for every primary school pupil in Scotland, and he said:

“we must not go back to kids going hungry in the classroom.”

First, that policy was supposed to happen in 2022; then it was delayed to 2026; and now the programme for government seems to have ditched it entirely. Can the First Minister be honest with people across Scotland? Will his Government deliver on its promise of free school meals to all primary school pupils during the current session of Parliament?

The First Minister: I in no way dismissed the expert commentary that Douglas Ross put to me. I will not have him misrepresenting my words in Parliament. I respect all those commentators, just as I respect the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which, in its “UK Poverty 2023” report, said:

“Divergence in policy across nations will probably drive greater disparity in poverty rates across”

the UK. It also said:

“Scotland has taken decisive action in defining child poverty targets in legislation and enhancing the benefits system with a Scottish child payment”.

The latest statistics show that the child poverty rate in Scotland is 24 per cent, compared with 30 per cent in England, 29 per cent in Wales and 23 per cent in Northern Ireland. I simply put that data on the record to demonstrate that we are taking action, but we are having to swim against a tide of austerity and welfare cuts that were inflicted on us by the previous Conservative Government, of which Douglas Ross was a supporter. That is before we get near the financial wreckage done by Liz Truss, which Douglas Ross wanted me to emulate. Thank goodness I did not do that.

The challenges that we face were well rehearsed to Parliament by the finance secretary on Tuesday. Cumulative inflation, which has been calculated at 18.9 per cent over the past three years, has undermined the value of the money that we have available. The Government will deliver the commitment that I set out yesterday, which is to ensure that free school meals are available for all primary 1 to primary 5 pupils on a universal basis, and for primary 6 and primary 7 pupils who are eligible for the Scottish child payment. We will deliver that in this parliamentary session.

Douglas Ross: I really do not know why Scottish National Party members are applauding that, because it was a very long answer that did not address my specific point. I will try again. Does John Swinney commit now to deliver the pledge,

which he made as education secretary, to deliver free school meals to all primary school pupils by the end of this parliamentary session? That was a simple question that can surely get a simple yes-or-no answer.

Let me ask about another pledge that the SNP made to the poorest children in Scotland. This year’s exam results showed that, at higher level, the attainment gap is wider than ever. As education secretary, John Swinney vowed to eradicate the attainment gap completely, yet John Swinney the First Minister’s bold ambition is merely to seek to reduce it—and he is even failing at that. Is he proud that his legacy will be Scotland’s poorest children falling further behind?

The First Minister: The Government is facing very challenging financial times. Yesterday, I set out that we will deliver on our commitment to ensure that free school meals are available for primary 6 and primary 7 pupils who are eligible for the Scottish child payment.

Douglas Ross: It should be for all primary 6 and all primary 7 pupils.

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the First Minister.

The First Minister: We will not be able, in this parliamentary session, to roll out universal eligibility across primary 6 and primary 7 pupils, because our budget has been eroded by the fiscal mismanagement and the sky-high inflation that Douglas Ross was party to creating as part of his support for the United Kingdom Government.

On the question of the attainment gap, the Scottish Government has given steadfast support to the education system through the delivery of the Scottish attainment challenge and the provision of pupil equity funding. What do we see? We see that, among young people who are leaving school and going into positive destinations, the attainment gap has reduced by 60 per cent. That is transformational for the lives of young people in Scotland, and I am glad that the Scottish Government has delivered on those commitments.

Douglas Ross: I am glad that, at my second attempt, I was able to get an honest answer out of John Swinney. He has confirmed that the SNP is breaking its promise to deliver free school meals to all primary school pupils in Scotland. That is movement from the position of his Deputy First Minister, who, when asked about it on the radio just this morning, suggested that it might still be possible and that the Government would do so during this session of Parliament if budgets allowed. John Swinney has ruled that out. He is now announcing to people across Scotland that the promise that he made as education secretary—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear Mr Ross.

Douglas Ross: —in asking people to support the SNP in order to get it into government has now been broken. Eradicating the attainment gap was supposed to be the SNP's number 1 priority, but the gap is as wide as ever. Now it is clear that the top priority of eradicating child poverty is going to go the same way, because the First Minister has just announced that the Government has abandoned its pledge to provide free school meals for all.

For 17 years, this Government has overpromised and underdelivered for Scotland's children. No one will believe yet another SNP empty promise to add to the pile.

This week's programme for government was supposed to be John Swinney's big relaunch, but instead we got more of the same from an SNP Government that is out of ideas and out of ambition. Are broken promises such as the one that John Swinney has just announced today the best that he has to offer Scotland's children?

The First Minister: My commitment to eradicating child poverty is steadfast in the programme for government, and the Government is putting in the resources to make sure that we can achieve that objective. More than £400 million has been spent on the Scottish child payment, which is keeping 100,000 children out of poverty. That is what is happening on this Government's watch. We have a lower child poverty rate in Scotland—it is far too high for my liking, but it has been made worse by 14 years of the folly and actions of the Conservative Government.

Douglas Ross: Your choices and your decisions.

The First Minister: As usual, Douglas Ross, from his front-bench seat, shouts and interrupts me, and he says that it is my choices.

Douglas Ross: You're getting angry.

The Presiding Officer: Mr Ross!

The First Minister: Yes, it is my choice, Mr Ross. It is my choice to make sure that we invest in the future of Scotland, which the Conservative Government destroyed with the austerity agenda that was supported by all the Conservative members over there.

What the people of Scotland will hear from this Government is a determination to ensure that we deliver on our commitments to lift children out of poverty, whereas the Tories have made the situation worse.

The Presiding Officer: Before we move to question 2, I remind members of the requirement that they conduct themselves in a courteous and respectful manner, and that includes respecting

the authority of the Presiding Officer when they are asked to desist from behaviour that is neither.

National Health Service Waiting Lists

2. **Anas Sarwar (Glasgow) (Lab):** I take the opportunity to welcome the election of a new United Kingdom Labour Government and to congratulate Keir Starmer on becoming Prime Minister. I am sure that all members in the chamber will want to congratulate all of Scotland's MPs, new or returning, regardless of their party, who have been elected to represent and deliver for the people of Scotland.

Yesterday, the First Minister outlined his programme for government—a statement with no vision, no strategy and no plan. Nowhere was that more glaring than it was for our national health service. On the Government's watch, more than 864,000 Scots are on an NHS waiting list, which is one in six people across the country. The two previous First Ministers promised a catch-up plan and things got worse, but this First Minister did not even mention it. Unbelievably, despite growing demand and lengthening waiting lists, our NHS is performing 50,000 fewer operations a year than it did before the pandemic.

By what date does John Swinney expect patients to receive the standard of care that they deserve and that they are legally entitled to?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I echo Anas Sarwar's words of welcome for Keir Starmer as the new Prime Minister. The Prime Minister telephoned me on the day of his election and he came to see me on the Sunday after the election. I very much welcome the efforts that the Prime Minister has made to create a better relationship between the Scottish Government and the United Kingdom Government—[*Interruption.*] Frankly, it couldnae have been any worse than it was before, but I acknowledge that effort. There have been a series of other engagements, and on some of the really significant issues that both Governments are wrestling with, there has been deep engagement, which I welcome. The Scottish Government will engage in all of that activity.

We face significant challenges in the NHS, as Mr Sarwar knows. The programme for government set out a range of interventions that we are making—this is where Mr Sarwar was incorrect in his question—to reduce waiting times in the NHS, expand the capacity for undertaking treatment and improve performance in a number of key areas, particularly diagnostic information. I put on the record yesterday information about cancer diagnosis, which is significant in improving the outcomes for individuals in Scotland.

We are working very hard to overcome the waiting lists that have been created as a

consequence of Covid, and the health service is being resourced to enable it to do so.

Anas Sarwar: I thank the First Minister for that answer, but I do not think that he understands that waiting lists are actually getting longer. Let us take a single example. Mark Rodgers is a former footballer. Mark has had prostate problems for years. In April, he was told that he needed urgent surgery, and he has been using a catheter for five months when it was only meant to be for weeks. He is in unbearable pain and has been having suicidal thoughts. Despite being told that his treatment is urgent, he has been told that he could have to wait for over another year. He said:

“I’m in constant threat of the life-threatening side effects and potential organ damage ... I haven’t acted on my suicidal thoughts, but I’m terrified where depression is leading me.”

NHS Lothian has confirmed that it will not meet the treatment time guarantee for Mark and has apologised. However, saying sorry does not cut waiting lists, so when will the Government stop failing Mark and the thousands of patients like him?

The First Minister: First, I am sorry about the detail that Mr Sarwar puts on the record on behalf of Mark Rodgers. If Mr Sarwar wishes to pass particular details to me, I will explore the case and determine whether anything more can be done to support the treatment of Mr Rodgers.

It is important to put on record the fact that we are still dealing with the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. We are resourcing the health service to a greater degree than would have been possible had we simply replicated the financial settlement from the United Kingdom Government. That has come about as a consequence of the decisions that the Government in Scotland has taken about taxation. We have asked those on higher incomes to contribute slightly more in taxes and we have invested a large proportion of that amount in the national health service.

I give Mr Sarwar the assurance that the Government will continue to invest in the national health service to expand capacity. We are trying to deliver the treatment that individuals require as timeously as possible. There are many examples of that happening, but I accept—and Mr Sarwar has put such a case on the record—that there will be cases in which that has not happened. I will endeavour to do all that I can to resolve those issues on behalf of Mr Rodgers and patients like him.

Anas Sarwar: The frustrating thing is that, week after week, the First Minister says sorry. Week after week, those sorrys do not cut waiting lists and people are still failed by the Government.

Mark is just one example among thousands of examples right across our NHS, which is in crisis. The statistics are so bad and the stories of patient failure are so regular that it feels as though the Government has become desensitised to the crisis. Some 37,000 Scots who are now on a waiting list for an operation have already waited for more than a year. Right now, almost 5,000 children are waiting for mental health care. Thousands of families have already been forced to empty their savings or borrow money to pay for private care, all while the NHS carries out 50,000 fewer operations a year.

Can the First Minister not see that behind every one of those cases is a patient in pain, an anxious family and a workforce at breaking point, and that we need a Government in Scotland that is serious about saving our NHS so that it is there for people when they need it?

The First Minister: I reassure Mr Sarwar that nobody in the Government—certainly not me and certainly not the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care—is desensitised to the scale of the challenge. We are very much focused on improving the performance of the national health service.

One of the examples that Mr Sarwar cited was children’s access to mental health services. Stronger performance is being delivered there, and I welcome that. That has come about because of the commitment and dedication of staff and the ability to expand the capacity to do that work.

We are taking steps to improve capacity in the health service. On cancer, for example, there is strong performance in terms of the median waits for individuals to receive treatment. Obviously, there will be people who wait longer—I accept that—but we are trying to reduce those waiting times as quickly as we possibly can. Doing so will remain the focus of policy making and decision making in the Scottish Government, and it commands the full attention of the health secretary and myself.

Free School Meals

3. **Lorna Slater (Lothian) (Green):** Free school meals for all primary school children were a commitment that the Scottish Greens secured back in 2021. That was being delivered when we were in government. The policy right up until April this year was to universally roll out meals to all children in primary 6 and 7 by 2026.

The Scottish Greens champion free school meals for all because we know that getting school meals to all kids is an effective way to mitigate the impacts of and stigma around child poverty. Yet, as soon as the Greens are out of the room, the Scottish Government drops the policy. Can the

First Minister therefore explain how we are supposed to take seriously his commitment to tackling child poverty?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government is facing acute financial challenges because of the persistence of the austerity agenda and the cumulative effect of inflation, which have eroded our budgets by a value of about one fifth in the past three years, and because we are having to find about £800 million in this financial year to meet public sector pay claims.

Lorna Slater will know from her experience in government that, once the financial year starts, the Government cannot expand the resources that are available to it. We have a fixed sum of money available to us once the financial year starts. All that we can do is either receive consequential funding from the United Kingdom Government, which might expand those resources, or reallocate resources within the budget.

The Government has reluctantly undertaken to take some decisions that will ensure that free school meals are available to young people whose families are in receipt of the Scottish child payment, which absolutely focuses our work on tackling poverty at a time when we are facing acute financial pressure. That is the difficult decision that the Government has had to make.

Lorna Slater will appreciate from her period in government that the Government regularly has to face up to difficult financial choices, particularly given the persistence of the austerity climate that we thought we had seen the back of with the Conservatives.

Lorna Slater: During our time in government, the Scottish Greens scrapped peak rail fares and introduced a groundbreaking fund to restore nature and create jobs across rural Scotland. We introduced legislation for a robust system of rent controls. We were on track to ban conversion practices and roll out free bus travel to asylum seekers. All that work is being undone, slashed, watered down or shelved, and now there is the betrayal of free school meals.

The message of this week's programme for government is that, if people want progressive green policies, they need to vote to have Greens in the room. What does the First Minister have to say to voters who backed those policies and now feel let down?

The First Minister: Lorna Slater's question gives me the opportunity to make clear that the Government is progressing with the legislation to ban conversion therapy in Scotland. However, we think it a pragmatic step to work with the United Kingdom Government to determine whether there is a UK-wide approach to that, which would enable us to avoid some of the difficulties in which we

found ourselves in relation to the gender recognition legislation. That is not walking away from the commitment to end conversion therapy but is a pragmatic step to try to avoid some of the legislative difficulties in which the Parliament found itself in relation to gender recognition. I hope that that provides some degree of reassurance.

Lorna Slater asked me what my message is to people at this particular time. We can look at that in a number of ways. The Government has put in place, agreed and supported pay deals that will lift families out of poverty. Household incomes will increase substantially and poverty will be eroded because of the above-inflation pay increases that the Government is prepared to sanction. Although I understand the anguish that people feel about those choices, I cannot spend the same money twice.

The Government believes that avoiding industrial action in our public services, so that we can address the issues that Mr Sarwar has—fairly—put to me about the performance of the health service, by ensuring that we deliver pay deals that are commensurate is important. However, at the same time as delivering those pay deals in a fixed budget, I cannot afford some of the policy commitments that I would dearly love to introduce, because we are still bound by the shackles of austerity.

Winter Fuel Payments

4. Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP): To ask the First Minister what analysis the Scottish Government is undertaking of any impact that reductions to winter fuel payments will have on people in Scotland. (S6F-03302)

The First Minister (John Swinney): Our analysis suggests that between 110,000 and 130,000 pensioners will remain eligible for a payment in Scotland this winter, which is a reduction of around 900,000 pensioners. The United Kingdom Government's decision to restrict eligibility for winter fuel payments, which was taken without any consultation with the Scottish Government, will have a devastating impact on the pension age winter heating payment. It represents a 90 per cent cut to our devolved budget for delivering a universal payment and is another example of Scotland being at the mercy of Westminster decisions, because we are left with no choice but to follow the UK Government's decision.

Kevin Stewart: Of my Aberdeen Central constituents, 9,078 are pensioners, and many of them are living in poverty. They are worried about the impact on them of Labour austerity. Does the First Minister share my view that Labour's brutal cutting of winter fuel payments is not only an attack on older people but an attack on devolution,

because the Chancellor of the Exchequer showed no interest whatever in consulting the Scottish Government ahead of her decision?

The First Minister: Kevin Stewart makes an absolutely valid point about the impact of the winter fuel payment cut. There will be pensioners who are not in an affluent position and who will be suffering significantly as a consequence of the cut. There was a commitment from the incoming Labour Government to reduce fuel bills by an average of £300. In fact, people will see their fuel bills increase by an average of £149, which will compound the damage that will be done to those pensioners. I do not underestimate the scale of the difficulty. If there was an alternative, I would have liked to have taken it, but Mr Stewart will appreciate, from his experience in Government, that I cannot, as much as I would like, find £160 million to enable us to continue that payment on a universal basis.

On the intergovernmental relations question, I accept that decisions get taken abruptly by Governments. Sometimes, my Government has to do that, too. I encourage the United Kingdom Government to engage in deeper dialogue with the Scottish Government as we try to resolve the very difficult circumstances that we all face.

“Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2022/23”

5. Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government’s response is to the recently published report, “Education Outcomes for Looked After Children 2022/23”. (S6F-03289)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government is resolute in our commitment to keep the Promise. The attainment gap between care-experienced school leavers and all children has been narrowing at all levels since 2009-10. That gap continues to narrow at the highest levels of achievement and, for lower-level qualifications, it remains narrower than it was pre-Covid.

Although overall figures indicate that there is more to be done on exclusions and attendance, with support through the care-experienced children and young people fund and the virtual headteacher network we have seen real successes in those areas in schools across Scotland. Working with Education Scotland, local government and The Promise Scotland, we must learn and build on that work to continue to improve outcomes for children and young people with care experience.

Roz McCall: I thank the First Minister for that response, but I am surprised. The key findings of the report are deeply concerning. Educational

attainment has fallen, school attendance rates are declining and the exclusion rate for looked-after children has risen for the first time in 12 years and is almost six times the exclusion rate for all pupils. Despite the commitments of the Promise, which, for example, include a promise to scrap the exclusions for care-experienced children, it is clear from the report that the Scottish Government is failing in that mission.

The chances of success of young people throughout Scotland are increasingly being determined by their circumstances, which is shameful. What has gone wrong? What more will the Government do to ensure that our care-experienced community gets what was promised?

The First Minister: The Government’s commitment to the Promise is absolute. I was in Government when the commitment was originally given, and it will remain steadfast in any Government that I lead.

However, I also recognise the challenges that we face in this regard. Just at the start of the school year, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills published the steps that have been taken in relation to behaviour and attendance in our schools, because we recognise—prompted by constructive discussion in the Parliament—that, in the Covid aftermath, there are significant implications in relation to school attendance and behaviour as a consequence of Covid’s disruptive effect. That affects all young people, and it will have an effect on care-experienced young people into the bargain.

Our focus on addressing those issues will continue. There are, of course, other aspects of work that we are doing that are being implemented as part of our commitment to the Promise. One of them was the enactment of the provisions of the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, which ends the placement of children in young offenders institutions in Scotland. I am glad that that came into force on 28 August, and I am deeply grateful to everybody across our system who has made that possible. That is just one other commitment in the Promise that the Government has delivered, and we will deliver more.

The Presiding Officer: More concise questions and responses will enable more members to have an opportunity to put questions.

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): The gap in secondary school attendance rates between looked-after pupils and all pupils has widened to eight percentage points in 2022-23. That means that actions that have been taken previously have not made a positive difference in getting those young people to school. What specifically will the First Minister change to get

attendance for care-experienced young people up?

The First Minister: I recognise the point that Mr Whitfield makes. Some measures are contained in the work that I set out in my original answer to Roz McCall. We will try to ensure that we maintain young people's engagement in education in all circumstances. Obviously, attendance would be desirable and ideal—

Martin Whitfield: Essential.

The First Minister: Mr Whitfield shouts to say that it is essential. I would like it to be essential, which would be ideal, but there are other ways of reaching children with education, such as by taking their education to them, if there is a difficulty in getting them into school. That is part of the measures that are being exhausted to ensure that we establish the connection with young people to maintain their education. That approach will lie at the heart of the steps that we take.

Nursing and Midwifery Vacancies

6. **Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab):** To ask the First Minister what action the Scottish Government is taking in response to reports that newly qualified nurses are unable to find employment in the national health service despite there being over 3,300 whole-time equivalent unfilled nursing and midwifery vacancies. (S6F-03298)

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Scottish Government hugely values the work of nurses and midwives. We continue to support our health boards to ensure that graduates can secure jobs in available roles in the national health service, and we work with boards to ensure that we reinforce their commitment to maximising the opportunities for newly qualified nurses to find employment.

Jackie Baillie: Just yesterday, the First Minister promised women more support from pregnancy through birth, yet, in the past few weeks, my office has been inundated with emails from distressed midwifery graduates and newly qualified paediatric nurses who are unable to get jobs.

Workforce planning needs to deliver safe staffing levels, yet hundreds of midwives and paediatric nurses are unemployed this year when we know that there are serious staff shortages. At least £12 million has been spent on their training, but cuts and vacancy freezes mean that they do not have jobs. Existing staff are burnt out and are leaving, patient outcomes are worse and the Government is in breach of its own legislation on safe staffing.

Is this yet another case of Scottish National Party financial incompetence, with the First

Minister's words yesterday just empty rhetoric, or will he act to ensure that these nurses fill the vacancies that we know exist in midwifery and paediatrics?

The First Minister: I want to ensure that the skills and talents of individuals are properly used in our health service. Under this Government, the number of qualified nurses and midwives has increased by 16.1 per cent. In paediatric nursing, the number of qualified nurses has also increased—it is up by 1.7 per cent in the past year. Across qualified midwife jobs, there has been an increase of 4.5 per cent in the past year. Those are some of the commitments that we are delivering.

As I said in my original answer, I want to encourage health boards to ensure that they have the resources and staffing available to deliver the services and support that I talked about in the programme for government statement yesterday. I recognise that constancy and consistency of support is essential in supporting women during pregnancy, and I want to ensure that the best outcomes can be achieved by that approach.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): I am sure that members, including Jackie Baillie, will welcome the First Minister's comments about the fact that the number of nursing and midwifery posts has increased by 4.5 per cent since last year. What further steps are being taken, in particular by the nursing and midwifery task force, to ensure that qualified nurses continue to be supported through the hiring process?

The First Minister: The nursing and midwifery task force is working collaboratively with stakeholders, including the Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Midwives, to develop actions that will help us to build a sustainable, attractive and respected nursing and midwifery workforce. That is the workforce planning that is being undertaken, which I was asked about a moment ago.

As part of the task force's activity, the work plan will be shaped by the voices of the current and future nursing and midwifery workforce. We expect the final report and the work plan to be published later this year.

The Presiding Officer: We move to constituency questions and general supplementaries.

Engagement with Libya (Eljamel)

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Yesterday's exclusive article in *The Courier* made it very clear that, to date, the Scottish Government has not had any engagement with the Libyan authorities about the disgraced surgeon Professor Eljamel, but it also put it on record that the Cabinet

Secretary for Health and Social Care has now suggested that that might be possible. Could the First Minister confirm that that is the case?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Obviously, there is widespread concern about the Eljamel case, which is the subject of a public inquiry that is under way. The health secretary is looking carefully at the issue to determine what approach we can take to ensure that any of the concerns that have been raised in the news article can be addressed as effectively as possible and that any of the information that we hold can be made available to the Libyan authorities as appropriate.

Winter Fuel Payments (Funding Allocation)

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): The First Minister will share my astonishment that the United Kingdom Labour Government has shamefully cut £140 million to £160 million in winter fuel payments to Scottish pensioners this year, while reportedly providing the Scotland Office with a similar sum—£150 million—with which to undermine devolution. What does the First Minister believe that that says about Labour's priorities and its approach to and respect for Scotland?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I was surprised by those reports, because I thought that we would be entering an era in which, after the damage that was done to the powers of the Scottish Parliament by the most recent Conservative Government in the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and the Subsidy Control Act 2022—damage that was resisted by the Labour Party while it was in opposition—we would see those provisions being reversed. It would be a good thing if those provisions were to be reversed, because they directly erode the powers of this Parliament. The public were never asked. Brexit was used as an excuse for eroding the powers of this Parliament.

Where there is proper and effective devolution, this Parliament should have the responsibility to take forward work in those areas for which it has responsibility. It should not be possible for those powers to be undermined by the actions of the United Kingdom Government. I hope that the UK Government will take the lead from Mr Gibson's question and reverse those undesirable provisions.

University of Dundee (Life Sciences Research)

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I know that the First Minister will want to join me in welcoming today's superb news of the provision by the new United Kingdom Labour Government of £30 million of funding for life sciences research at the University of Dundee. That research work is extraordinary and vital. It is delivering

breakthroughs in the treatment of skin cancer, and there is now the prospect of the new funding advancing the fight against Parkinson's and Crohn's disease.

The University of Dundee has been the leading life sciences university in the UK for two decades, and I know that the Parliament will want to recognise that. Does the First Minister agree that the diversity of our world-leading universities across Scotland is a vital national strength? What can he do to continue to support that work and the diversity of all our universities in conducting groundbreaking research in science?

The First Minister (John Swinney): As Mr Marra will not be surprised to hear, I am very familiar with the life sciences work of the University of Dundee. Over my parliamentary career, it has been my privilege to talk about the issue on many occasions with individuals such as Professor Mike Ferguson, who has done such superb work in developing the resources at the University of Dundee. Of course, that work has been built on very strong foundations over many years. The University of Dundee has taken a significant role in life science research over many years. It is an area of critical strength that has attracted a lot of support from Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government for many years. The Deputy First Minister visited those facilities in the summer. I wish the University of Dundee every success and the Government will work collaboratively to ensure that that is enhanced.

Mitsubishi Electric (Risk to Jobs)

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): The First Minister will be aware of reports that more than 400 jobs are at risk at the Mitsubishi Electric plant in Livingston. That announcement could have a significant social and economic impact for my constituents in neighbouring Edinburgh Pentlands and beyond. Will the First Minister outline what engagement the Scottish Government has had with Mitsubishi and what support is in place for those who are at risk of redundancy?

The First Minister (John Swinney): I was concerned to hear the reports about the proposals from Mitsubishi Electric. The factory is a significant and highly specialised asset in Scotland, and it is one that I have visited in the past. The Minister for Employment and Investment has spoken with Mitsubishi Electric to understand the rationale behind the company's position. Scottish Enterprise is working closely with the company to consider all viable options. If we reach a point where there is any loss of employment, we will, of course, be in a position to support employees, but the intervention by Scottish Enterprise is designed to create a pathway to avoid that situation. The focused

activities of Scottish Enterprise will be at the company's disposal in order to avoid any loss of employment.

Land Restoration Projects (Waste Dumping)

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Residents of New Cumnock have raised concerns about raw sewage being dumped in the area, under the guise of a land restoration project. Locals believe that to be a health and safety hazard that is contaminating watercourses and affecting businesses, forcing them to close their doors due to the stench. This is not the first time that the issue of waste dumping has been raised in the area. I have been raising the issue of Tarbolton Moss landfill site for more than three years, but little progress has been made. I therefore ask the First Minister what checks are made on land that has been designated for restoration projects and what measures are in place to ensure that discarded waste materials comply with regulations?

The First Minister (John Swinney): Sharon Dowey has put on the record some very concerning points that sound to me to be wholly unacceptable. The regulatory authorities—Scottish Water and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency—should undertake scrutiny of those issues, along with the local authority. If Sharon Dowey would like to furnish me with more information, I will certainly raise it with the relevant regulatory authorities, because her constituents should not have to endure that experience.

People with Disabilities (Human Rights Legislation and Support)

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Human rights organisations such as the Scottish Human Rights Commission, Amnesty and the Human Rights Consortium have described the Government's abandonment of human rights legislation during this session of Parliament as "disappointing", "unjustifiable" and "a breach of trust". That is coupled with the apparent abandonment of the Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill and with decisions such as the one to reprofile £10 million of money for changing places toilets. What does the First Minister think that that says to disabled people? What does he think it says more widely to people whose human rights are often most at risk? What will his Government do about that?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The Government takes a number of steps to ensure that rights and support for disabled people are taken forward. During the summer, along with the Minister for Equalities, I met the Glasgow Disability Alliance and a number of other organisations representing people with disabilities and we had a

very open conversation about some of the issues that must be addressed. I assure Mr O'Kane, and stakeholders, that the Government take those issues very seriously and will take all practical steps that we can to address the issues that are of concern.

School Transport (North Lanarkshire)

Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Parents, carers and pupils in Motherwell and Wishaw have repeatedly raised concerns after the Labour administration in North Lanarkshire, with support from the Conservatives, cut school transport provision. I share those concerns, having walked some of those routes with families and watched Sean Ferrie's brilliant video about his walk to school, detailing the hazards that he will face if that cut is rolled out to primary schools, as planned, next year. What processes are in place for parents, carers and pupils to challenge decisions on safety grounds and to challenge the local authority's refusal to review those walking routes?

The First Minister (John Swinney): The issues at stake here are properly a matter for the local authority to determine, but it has a duty to make the arrangements that it considers necessary for the transport of pupils between home and school and to have regard to their safety. That commitment is a significant element of the guidance that is available, which has to be addressed by the local authority. The local authority's engagement processes should be designed to ensure that parents and carers can make representations where they are concerned about the safety of their children, and the local authority should take those seriously.

Proposed Galloway National Park

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): As the First Minister will be aware, since plans for a new Galloway national park were announced over the summer, there has been significant and growing opposition to the proposal, which now spills into my Dumfriesshire constituency. Many fear that this promises to be yet another example of urban do-gooders imposing their sanitised, overregulated idea of the countryside on already fragile rural and agricultural communities. The proposal is not supported by the local NFU Scotland branch, and hundreds of people are concerned about what is planned. Can the First Minister give a guarantee today that, if local people say no to the proposal, it will not go ahead?

The First Minister (John Swinney): There is an aspiration for there to be national parks. Part of my constituency is in a national park, and a lot of good work is undertaken there. The process of taking forward the proposals in relation to a

Galloway national park requires engagement and consultation, and the Government stands ready to undertake that dialogue and discussion. We will listen to the points that are put forward by Mr Mundell and his constituents who are affected and the process will come to its conclusion. I simply encourage anyone who has a view to express about the proposal to take part in the consultation process.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes First Minister's questions. Before we move to the next item of business, there will be a short suspension to allow people to leave the chamber and the public gallery.

12:47

Meeting suspended.

12:49

On resuming—

United Nations Declaration on Future Generations

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): The next item of business is a members' business debate on motion S6M-14137, in the name of Sarah Boyack, on recognising the UN's Declaration on Future Generations. The debate will be concluded without any question being put.

Motion debated,

That the Parliament recognises the UN's Declaration on Future Generations, a document launched in relation to the UN's Summit of the Future in September 2024; acknowledges the calls urging Scotland to be governed with future generations and their interests in mind; notes the belief that Scotland must commit to playing its part to seize the global opportunity that present generations possess to leave a better future for generations to come, and further notes calls to advance the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, including in the Lothian region, in order to build strong and resilient foundations to achieve this.

12:49

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): I thank colleagues for supporting my motion and enabling the debate, and I welcome Alasdair Allan to his ministerial role.

This month, the United Nations will host a summit of the future, which is being described as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reinvigorate global action. People from around the world will gather together to wrestle with one of the most important questions of our time: what can we do now to build a planet that survives and thrives for the generations that follow us? That is an essential question that every parliamentarian should ask themselves, and it must reframe how we see the way we legislate, the actions that we take and the priorities that we pursue.

As part of the summit, attendees will vote on the Declaration on Future Generations. The declaration's message is clear: we have a responsibility for future generations. The declaration also stresses the importance of the UN's sustainable development goals. By prioritising those, we can do the vital work that is needed to protect future generations. The goals call on all nations to work for education, peace, health and wellbeing, to preserve nature, eradicate poverty and establish equality for all. However, we have to work together and use the powers and leadership of our Parliament to deliver the action to make those goals a reality.

Lack of action will have an intergenerational multiplier effect. Mistakes made now will be paid

for long after we are gone, but positive decisions that we make today could have a cumulative effect on wellbeing long into the future. We have an opportunity as a Parliament to future proof the foundations of our country and to build wellbeing and sustainability into all our policy and planning. Our every action can be taken with a big picture in mind, and we could leave a remarkable legacy behind.

Scotland will not be alone in that. Increasingly, the whole world is realising the need for global action that plans for a bright and sustainable future. I have seen it working. The inspiring discussions that we had in Vilnius last year at the congress on the future of the world gave me the chance to hear at first hand about the action that is being taken by parliamentarians across the world. We now know that several countries are acting with long-term intergenerational goals in mind. Kenya is developing an intergenerational fairness assessment tool, and we are seeing action in Mexico, Costa Rica and New Zealand. Closer to home, we are seeing action in other European Parliaments. For example, just last year, the Parliament of the Balearic Islands approved a law for the wellbeing of the present and future generations, and, at a European Union level, Ursula von der Leyen intends to appoint a commissioner with responsibilities for intergenerational fairness.

The world increasingly recognises that we have the power to shape the world for the better and to do it for centuries to come, but in Scotland we are not quite there yet, and we are currently missing the opportunity presented to us.

Fantastic work is being done by a range of groups, such as the Wellbeing Economy Alliance Scotland, Scotland's International Development Alliance and Carnegie UK, and we have a meeting of our cross-party group on wellbeing tomorrow morning. However, an important report that was produced by Carnegie UK highlighted that Scotland is falling behind in integrating wellbeing frameworks. It stated:

"we could not locate a single national policy in Scotland that the NPF has significantly impacted."

Worse, it also stated:

"Scotland now cuts a diminished figure on an international stage of wellbeing-focussed governments it helped establish."

The one glimmer of hope that was highlighted in the Carnegie paper was the Scottish Government's commitment to a wellbeing and sustainability bill that would enshrine in law the requirement to consider those factors across every area of legislation. However, disappointingly, when the programme for government was announced yesterday, the bill was conspicuously absent. That

is bad news for future generations and flies in the face of a global movement towards sustainable development. If action is not taken, Scotland will continue to fall behind in legislation that builds a sustainable future.

Colleagues may be aware that I have a solution. My proposed member's bill on wellbeing and sustainable development has established cross-party support and is in the stages of being drafted. More than 150 organisations pushed hard before the 2021 elections for greater action in this area. The time for action is now. We can embed the priorities of wellbeing and sustainability in everything that we do as a Parliament, and my bill would ensure that that happens.

I know that the Scottish Government has been working on the issue. It is a vital and hugely popular idea. I hope that the Scottish Government will whole-heartedly support my bill because too often we see short-term decisions. For example, using the ScotWind income to plug a gap in this year's finances is exactly the kind of action that jeopardises future generations.

Scotland desperately needs a sustainable development framework that allows us to tackle deep-rooted problems, including fuel poverty, poor health and lack of economic opportunity. We urgently need joined-up action to tackle our climate and nature emergencies.

Experience in Wales shows that legislation, with a commissioner focused on delivery, can be transformative, giving leadership, security and guidance.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I have been listening to what the member is saying, and I am very much in support of the vast majority of it. She has mentioned a commissioner, and she may know that the Finance and Public Administration Committee has been carrying out an inquiry into commissioners. There is concern that we now have more and more commissioners, and that that could divert money away from front-line services. How would she respond to that?

Sarah Boyack: I go back to my point about the experience in Wales, where the legislation was established in 2016. The commissioner who was established there has not just given leadership but has delivered savings and has enabled cross-government work. That is critical, and we urgently need that in Scotland. It is not just about having a commissioner for the sake of the name; it is about transforming decisions, priorities and funding now, because that will benefit not just future generations but our constituents and our communities now. Let us get on with it.

There is a global opportunity here, colleagues, one that the UN's Declaration on Future Generations recognises. It is an opportunity to

change the future for good. However, I go back to my earlier point. If we delay now and pursue sticking-plaster politics instead of robust action that works for a brighter, happier future, tomorrow's generations will be the ones who pick up the bill. That is not fair and it is not right.

We have a duty to those who will follow us and, as the United Nations meets to declare its commitment for future generations, let us play our part and deliver the transformation that our world urgently needs.

12:57

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I welcome the debate. I thank Sarah Boyack for lodging her motion and for bringing the debate to the chamber. I note the focus in her remarks and in the briefings that we have received in advance of the debate from many stakeholders, on prioritisation, on the history of action on these matters from the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament in recent years, and on building a greater wellbeing economy and society here in Scotland. That has included being part of the initial number of countries in the growing wellbeing economy Governments partnership, known as WEGo: New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Wales, Canada and, of course, Scotland. I remember, during the time when I had the privilege of being Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development for the Scottish Government, speaking with the Finnish Government as it looked to join the group, and it was great to see Finland become part of it thereafter.

In Scotland, we have the national performance framework, which is considered by all areas of government and more widely, and concerns the allocation of resources and how we make progress to build a greater wellbeing economy and society. I think that it should be called the wellbeing performance framework, which would be more accessible. Perhaps, if there is an opportunity for a name change at some point, that might help with the engagement that is happening more widely than the work of the statutory services and stakeholders who are involved every day.

I appreciate the points that Sarah Boyack made about specific legislation and the support for that idea from different stakeholders, including Aileen McLeod, who was a member of this Parliament and of the European Parliament. She has argued that everyone should have the opportunity to live a good and dignified life, both now and in the future, and that we need to think about how we get clarity in a situation with competing goals. That has been on my mind over recent months and years, and it is particularly pertinent in this 25th year of devolution. Here in Scotland and elsewhere in

other democracies, we are facing a challenge in the mixture of our political culture and the demands that are facing all societies—including ours—in relation to public sector service delivery, economic competitiveness, climate change and greater global insecurity. The question of how to react to that multi-challenge in a reasonable and considered way that is deliverable for the people we serve is really difficult.

I am open minded about the possibility of legislating, whether through a member's bill or in the next parliamentary session. However, as is the case in a number of other areas where we have legislated, we need to focus more passionately and more determinedly on the political culture and the delivery of legislation. If we do not change the political culture and set goals that we all agree on rather than seeing everything as a political opportunity, we will not make progress on the really big issues, whether in Scotland or at an international level.

Sarah Boyack talked about sticking-plaster politics. All parties have been engaged in sticking-plaster politics or in calling for such politics. There was a lot of sticking-plaster politics in the reaction to the programme for government yesterday—sweeping statements and criticism, rather than firm ideas for improvement.

Sarah Boyack: The point about short-term versus long-term decisions is important, but the experience of the Welsh commissioner—we are now on to the second commissioner—shows that scrutiny and hard work, and not just speeches in Parliament, are critical. We do not have that approach at the moment.

Ben Macpherson: I take the point. There is also the point about commissioners that was made earlier. More importantly, we can take recommendations from commissioners, have strategies from Government and have law and policy, but our political culture needs to change if we are to address long-term challenges. That is a big challenge for all of us in the Parliament in the 25th year since its reconvening.

13:02

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): I congratulate Sarah Boyack on securing this debate on the UN Declaration on Future Generations. I also welcome Alasdair Allan to his new ministerial role.

We are all united in wanting to leave a better world for our children. Right now, that can seem a daunting task as humanity faces a multitude of problems, from conflicts and economic uncertainty to climate change and biodiversity loss. I will focus on environmental degradation, not least because it underpins many of the challenges that future

generations might face, from resource scarcity and extreme weather to health impacts.

Scotland is already one of the most depleted countries on earth, with an astonishing one in nine species at risk of extinction, according to the “State of Nature Scotland 2023” report. Our economy continues to rely on extracting and consuming new resources. It is just 1.3 per cent circular, according to “The Circularity Gap Report”. We continue to pump out far too many greenhouse gases. The targets for reducing those have been missed in nine out of the past 13 years.

Tackling those issues now would be one of the biggest gifts that we could give to future generations. It is like saving for your child’s future. If you start when they are born, you can watch small efforts compound and grow, but, if you wait until they have grown up, you simply do not have as much time to help them.

The draft declaration makes that point in the preamble, when it recognises

“that our decisions, actions, and inactions today, have an intergenerational multiplier effect, such that our conduct today will impact future generations exponentially, and therefore emphasizing that present generations, carry a responsibility towards future generations to act with their interests in mind”.

If we want those exponential effects to be positive ones, we have to act now. The good news is that we all recognise that fact. I have always applauded the ambition that the Scottish Government has shown on tackling climate change, but ambition is nothing without delivery, and I am afraid to say that that is not happening.

I have already spoken about missed targets, but there have also been missed opportunities. Let us consider the Circular Economy (Scotland) Act 2024. That was our chance to kick-start a truly sustainable economy that would conserve resources for future generations, create jobs and wealth that are not easily offshored and keep us on track to meet our environmental goals. However, the Scottish Government seemed to prefer a watered-down bill that focused on shorter-term goals, such as those on littering and recycling. Both those issues are important, but neither will lead to the long-term structural changes that we need.

The same short-term approach was on display during the past fortnight as the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government cut millions of pounds from climate and nature budgets to plug holes in the overall budget. That approach will just compound problems further down the line, with future generations having to work harder and pay more to deal with them. As it happens, the draft declaration mentions the need for intergenerational dialogue in decision making. I

hope that the Scottish Government pays attention to that—the prosperity of future generations depends on it.

13:06

Martin Whitfield (South Scotland) (Lab): I thank Sarah Boyack for lodging this important motion for debate in the chamber, as well as those across the chamber who supported it. I echo others in welcoming Alasdair Allan to his new position.

The UN’s Declaration on Future Generations asks us all to govern with future generations in mind. It recognises, as we must, that the decisions, actions and inactions of present generations have an intergenerational multiplier effect. The decisions that we make today, along with our discussions, debates and votes, as well as the politicking that Ben Macpherson mentioned, will all affect not only current generations but those that come after them.

I will take some time to talk about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The decisions that any Government in Scotland makes must now, by law, take into account and fully consider the rights of the child. That is an incredible responsibility. The Declaration on Future Generations reminds us that it is not just today’s children whose rights we must consider; we must also consider tomorrow’s children. That calls on the Government and politicians to go beyond short-term decision making, such as raiding ScotWind’s fund to balance the budget. We need long-term solutions, capital investment in the green industries of tomorrow and a national health service that will outlive us. We need to build safe, warm and affordable houses that will last, and we need an education system that meets the needs of our young people and equips them to build a future for those who will come after them. We need real action to get rid of not just the symptoms of poverty but poverty itself and all its roots.

We are quite used to hearing promises of jam tomorrow in lieu of jam today. However, young people have a genuine concern that there might not be a tomorrow. A significant number of them share that fear, which feeds into their learning, their desires and their outreach to politicians about their concerns for tomorrow. Long-term decision making is not popular.

Ben Macpherson: Mr Whitfield makes an important point. Does he agree that we have a collective responsibility not only to hear, register and act on young people’s fears but to work together to give young people in our country and elsewhere a sense that the future can be better and ensure that we take forward policies that will achieve that?

Martin Whitfield: I whole-heartedly agree. There needs to be optimism and hope that there will be a better tomorrow, because there is one.

When taking decisions now, we need to consider the challenges of long-term decision making compared with short-term decision making. Politicians will ask, “What do I need to do to win an election in one year’s time or two years’ time?” rather than ask, “What do I need to do for all of us over the next 10 to 20 years that will bring benefits?” That short-termism—the type of politics that Ben Macpherson was talking about—cannot continue.

However, we have got quite used to hearing that, and we need to change the narrative of the argument. I will finish, therefore, by highlighting what I think is one of the most important lines in the declaration, because it gives us a route map to move away from that approach. It calls on us to recognise

“children and youth as agents of change”

who should

“be taken into consideration in our policy and decision-making processes in order to safeguard the needs and interests of future generations”.

I think that we need to go a step further by not simply recognising our young people as agents of change but facilitating them to be those agents, so that, in the future, as Sarah Boyack said, they are not picking up the bill from today but enjoying what we have paid forward today to benefit them tomorrow.

13:10

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): I thank Sarah Boyack for bringing the debate to the chamber and for her long-term commitment to this work.

It is hard to take a long view in politics. We often talk about the future of the children and young people whom we know and see, but political timescales tend to tip the balance towards considering the current electorate. However, what of those who are not yet born? The UN declaration urges us to consider them all, as it refers to being

“Cognizant that future generations are all those generations that do not yet exist, are yet to come and who will eventually inherit this planet.”

That is a sobering responsibility, which calls on us to look ahead, not just to 2026 or 2050, or even to 2100, but as far beyond as we can reasonably expect human beings to live here. Of course, the future survival of humanity depends largely on what we do now, so we need a way to assess the decisions that we make now in terms of how their impact on future generations will shape the world to come.

We need to take those responsibilities seriously, not just in politics but in wider society. To a large extent, in comparison with peoples across the earth and across time, we are cultural outliers, in that we do not do that. The UN declaration points that out, stating that:

“many social, cultural and religious or spiritual belief-based practices, as well as numerous national constitutions and legal systems exist, that seek to safeguard future generations and promote intergenerational solidarity and responsibility”.

That intergenerational solidarity—intergenerational equity—is particularly acute in relation to our earth, with its climate and biodiversity, and how we can either co-exist with or extract and exploit non-human nature. As the declaration recognises, that is more important now than ever. It says:

“our decisions, actions, and inactions today, have an intergenerational multiplier effect, such that our conduct today will impact future generations exponentially”.

That exponential impact demands serious informed consideration.

Sadly, such attention has not been a feature of Westminster politics for a long time. The Sustainable Development Commission, which was set up to do exactly that work, was abolished during the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition’s so-called bonfire of the quangos. It will be interesting to see whether Keir Starmer’s Government chooses to reinstate the commission.

Wales responded to that piece of policy vandalism by passing the bill that became the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. From Scotland, we have watched the impacts of the 2015 act with interest, and not just a little envy. It took time, of course, for the act to make substantive change—Sophie Howe felt that it took three years for significant progress to be made. Nonetheless, its effects have been real, influencing not only individual decisions but ways of thinking and working. For example, the current Future Generations Commissioner for Wales is working on resources for long-term thinking and is tracing the links from current decisions to their impact on people’s lives as this century makes way for the next.

Another of the ways of working involves identifying a growing movement of individuals, in and beyond public services, who are pushing for change. Of course, that does not always require legislation, as the Dundee Changemakers Hub in North East Scotland shows.

Much of what the UN declaration calls for is happening in civil society, including the recognition of the need for intergenerational dialogue and engagement that is dynamically enacted here in Scotland by generations working together.

However, other aspects of the declaration will need Government action if they are to be fully realised. The declaration talks of

“building a strong foundation for sustainable peace, prosperity and the protection of human rights”

as being

“the most effective way to safeguard the needs and interests of future generations”.

That is because intergenerational responsibility is not an optional extra to be added on to democracy and good governance; it should—and must—be at their heart, as a matter of justice, equity and human rights.

13:15

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I thank Sarah Boyack for bringing this debate to the chamber. It was inspiring to hear from her about the many international examples and to hear from Maggie Chapman about how intergenerational equity is so embedded in many societies.

I will focus my comments on the practicalities of what we do here at Holyrood. This week, as we have done in every year since 1999, we are scrutinising the Government’s short-term annual policy and budget choices. Much of our work as MSPs is focused on short-term delivery, but there is a pressing need to look beyond the short term—beyond electoral cycles—and towards the needs of not only the current generations but those who have yet to be born.

The big societal challenges of this century cannot be solved with short-term, year-to-year thinking, yet, in our consideration of issues such as hospital waiting lists, there is rarely space to bottom out the long-term preventative policies that could ultimately lead to a better society. That means that we miss the opportunity to make the links between, say, health and transport or between poverty and the environment. In a Parliament that is always driven by the immediacy of crisis, it can sometimes feel indulgent to pull back and start to look at the bigger picture. That is a major reason why, years on from the Christie commission’s recommendations on public sector reform, we have yet to see meaningful progress in areas such as preventative spend. It always feels indulgent to talk about such spend when we come to budget scrutiny in committee.

In that context, having a future generations commissioner for Scotland is essential. Such a proposal was mentioned in the Bute house agreement and was being delivered by my colleague Patrick Harvie. It is good to see Sarah Boyack keeping that flag flying.

As Sophie Howe, the former Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, put it,

“The Commissioner’s role is to take a helicopter view—not necessarily getting into the nitty gritty of problems emerging in the here and now—but offering a longer-term perspective”

and

“joining the dots between issues and organisations”.

Sarah Boyack: The need for guidance and constructive collaborative work right across the public sector has become clear from feedback on and analysis of the commissioner’s work. Does Mr Ruskell agree that we are not getting that, but that we need it urgently?

Mark Ruskell: Absolutely. This is a big piece of work; it is not something that a parliamentary committee can do on its own. There is a need to equip the whole public sector to think in the long term. I know that the Welsh FGC has been focusing on the skills to plan for 25 years ahead.

I have seen at first hand the benefits of having such a commissioner in Wales. Members might remember that, in 2018, I brought forward a member’s bill to introduce a 20mph safer speed limit for built-up roads in Scotland. At the same time, Wales was considering adopting a similar approach, and I was delighted to be part of that Welsh conversation. The role of the FGC in that debate was hugely important, because she was able to draw together the long-term public health case for communities of a speed limit change. That really helped to establish the right basis for moving the issue forward in the Senedd in a cross-party and consensual way, which, with hindsight, and looking back at my member’s bill, perhaps we lacked here at Holyrood.

Of course, later on, there were those who sought to make the roll-out of the 20mph limit a political culture war in Wales. However, now that the dust has settled there, we are starting to see the long-term benefits bed in, starting with huge and dramatic reductions in road casualties on Welsh streets. That is partly down to the work of the public health sector in Wales and the Future Generations Commissioner in leading that debate.

There are many other examples of where that commissioner has been pivotal in driving reform. I understand the Finance and Public Administration Committee’s concerns about the growth in the number of commissioners more generally in Scotland, but there is good practice from Wales about how its commissioner has worked closely with Audit Wales and other commissioners to share staff, reduce costs and maximise joint working. We should learn from that in any review that the Parliament undertakes of our commissioner landscape.

I again thank Sarah Boyack for securing this debate. She reflects our shared priorities to raise the focus of the public sector on the needs of future generations and a sustainable Scotland. I wish her good luck, and I will listen closely to the words of the minister in closing.

13:20

The Acting Minister for Climate Action (Alasdair Allan): I thank everyone for the nice things that they have said about me in my new job, which is a rare opportunity in which I will happily bask.

I thank Sarah Boyack for lodging the motion and securing today's debate on the UN's draft Declaration on Future Generations. This Government recognises the draft declaration and eagerly anticipates the summit of the future this month, so I very much welcome Ms Boyack's drawing the issues to the fore and bringing them to the Parliament's attention.

It has been a useful debate and, of course, were Scotland to participate in our own right as an independent UN member state, we would be able to have a much more direct input into the development of UN positions. However, even as a devolved Government, we are committed to ensuring that the interests of future generations are central to our decision making.

The upcoming summit presents an opportunity to renew international commitment to and co-operation on the UN's 2030 agenda. Scotland remains steadfast in making our contribution to that agenda to secure a safe and prosperous world for future generations, and it is also an opportunity to take up the challenge of long-term thinking that many members rightly highlighted today.

Our goal of a sustainable wellbeing economy seeks to leave a better future for generations to come. We are devoted to the principles of a fair, green and growing wellbeing economy that reinforce our four key priorities. By addressing those priorities now, we are investing in the wellbeing of the future.

Our programme for government reaffirms our commitment to the sustainable development goals, which reflect our common vision for Scotland and beyond. They help us to keep future generations in mind, to work to deliver public services, to protect our planet and to empower people and communities.

Maggie Chapman rightly pointed to the international context. Scotland continues to be active and engaged internationally. That includes contributing to multilateral discussions and programmes on biodiversity, climate change,

health, education, human rights and humanitarian crises, including working with the UN and others. The actions that are being progressed in Scotland's international strategy will further Scotland's contribution. That includes pioneering global action on climate justice and galvanising international agreement on a loss and damage fund.

Scotland is leading on climate action at home and abroad, including in the global south. That includes leadership roles as president of Regions4 and co-chair of the Under2 Coalition, and collaborating closely with other devolved Governments to progress action, including our world-leading climate justice fund.

As Maurice Golden rightly said, some of our environment in Scotland remains degraded, which is a challenge for us all. When we listen to young people, they can often identify solutions to that and other questions. That includes through Scotland's Climate Assembly, where contributions through the Children's Parliament fed into recommendations to ministers, including on legislation to restrict the use of single-use plastic. We continue to engage young people in our just transition plans and the path to net zero. By prioritising climate action, we will safeguard the future for Scotland's coming generations.

The Government remains dedicated to protecting, promoting and advancing human rights, and to developing ambitious legislation to incorporate more international treaties into Scots law. We have successfully incorporated the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, aligning our nation with UN standards. That develops our commitment to place children who are alive today as well as forthcoming generations of children at the heart of our decision making, as those with the greatest stake in our future.

As Ben Macpherson has emphasised, we are taking concrete steps to eradicate poverty in line with UN commitments, with child poverty being the Government's top priority. We are progressing action to reach the ambitious targets of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, including assigning £3 billion a year to tackle poverty and the reality of the cost of living crisis.

The Scottish Government is happy to continue dialogue with Ms Boyack on her bill. We are staunch in our objective of developing sustainable public health services, including through programmes such as our centre for sustainable delivery and through bolstering preventative support.

As a Government, we will continue to take action to combat numerous inequalities, both in Scotland and in our international development partner countries, to leave a fairer world for future

generations. That includes our equally safe delivery plan, which progresses action on the UN priority of eradicating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls.

Mr Whitfield highlighted the importance of intergenerational planning as opposed to short-termism and, again, I think that there is consensus in the chamber on that. I have to point out, though, that we face challenges in that respect when the Parliament does not know from year to year what income it has to work with or what it will be allocated. However, we will act, and we do need to meet the challenges of the future.

Mark Ruskell said some wise and challenging words about the difficulties at the heart, perhaps, of democracy, or the difficulty of thinking of the long term in the heat of an electoral cycle or the heat of political events. We need to think about that, and we need to build genuine political consensus on these issues.

In conclusion, the draft declaration challenges this and other Governments to act as a global team player and to strengthen the foundations for lasting action on sustainable development, thereby safeguarding the interests of future generations. As emphasised by the First Minister in the programme for government, we are committed to working across party lines, not least via the declaration, to improve the lives of the people of Scotland and well beyond.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate.

13:27

Meeting suspended.

14:30

On resuming—

Portfolio Question Time

Net Zero and Energy, and Transport

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): Good afternoon. The first item of business is portfolio questions, and the portfolio on this occasion is net zero and energy, and transport.

I invite members who wish to ask a supplementary question to press their request-to-speak button during the relevant question and I ask them to cut out any lengthy preambles and limit themselves to a single question. I make a plea for responses to be similarly brief.

National Transport Strategy

1. **Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab):** I remind members of my voluntary entry in the register of members' interests.

To ask the Scottish Government what steps it has taken to implement Scotland's national transport strategy. (S6O-03669)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The national transport strategy was developed collaboratively with partners and underpins all decision making that is related to transport, with regional transport partnerships developing strategies for their area to align with it. Delivering its vision is a shared endeavour, with responsibilities across the Scottish Government, operators, local authorities, business, industry and users. I co-chair the national transport strategy delivery board alongside the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and it includes members from partner organisations.

Last December, we published a report to Parliament outlining the steps that we have taken to deliver the strategy, alongside our third delivery plan for 2023-24. The fourth plan will be published later this year.

Richard Leonard: The Scottish Government's national transport strategy is based on four priorities: reducing inequality; taking action on climate change; delivering economic growth; and improving health and wellbeing. Scrapping peak fares on ScotRail has driven a shift from road to rail. Four million extra train journeys have been made—two million of them because people have been incentivised to leave their cars at home. Does the cabinet secretary not understand why people are angry about her announcement that the Government will force up some rail fares by 48 per cent? Does she not accept that that decision fails on every single one of her Government's four

national transport strategy tests? Will she do the right thing while there is still time and reverse this disastrous decision?

Fiona Hyslop: There are a number of portfolio questions on this topic. I will address the member's questions directly. He is quite correct to identify that the Scottish Government's national missions include tackling child poverty and tackling the climate emergency.

On the measure of modal shift, the peak fares trial failed, unfortunately. The amount of car journeys that transferred to rail was 0.1 per cent. In addition, the discount that has existed over the past year has seen many existing rail users benefit by hundreds if not thousands of pounds, but the assessment, which I encourage him to read, shows that the majority of those who benefited were on middle to high incomes. On those two measures alone, the report shows that his analysis is incorrect.

With the discounts that are being provided, a flexipass between Falkirk and Edinburgh will cost £13.40 per return journey for five returns, compared with the current off-peak fare of £12.10. With an annual season ticket, travelling four days a week, the fare will be £10.04. That is a reduction. If the member listens to what I have said and is prepared to promote the discounts that are being announced now for the coming year and beyond, he will see that some people will be paying a similar amount to what they have been paying during the peak fare removal trial. He will see that if he looks at the figures.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: That is not an auspicious start on the back of my request for brevity. Bill Kidd, let us see whether we can do any better.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): More than 150 million free bus journeys have been made by children and young people in Scotland since the introduction of free bus travel for under-22s. Will the cabinet secretary set out how that Scottish Government initiative is working towards the vision and priorities of the national transport strategy?

Fiona Hyslop: One year on, the evaluation of the scheme has shown that, by making bus travel more accessible, it is already opening doors to new opportunities and reducing travel costs for families across Scotland. By making sustainable travel easier and cheaper for Scotland's children and young people, that transformational policy is giving them the very best chance to succeed in life, as well as supporting them to play their part in cutting emissions and taking climate action in line with the vision of the national transport strategy.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): The reintroduction of peak fares on the railways

will mean huge fare increases across the country. If I want to get a return from East Kilbride to Glasgow, it will cost me 55 per cent more, and a return journey from East Kilbride to Edinburgh will cost me 84 per cent more. How does that fit in with the Scottish Government's ambition to cut car journeys by a fifth by next year?

Fiona Hyslop: The member's latter point is an incorrect assessment of what the plans are in relation to the reduction of car journeys.

In relation to the member's travel, as he is a regular commuter by train, he can use a flexipass, which will have a permanent 20 per cent reduction, or he can use an annual season ticket, which will have a 20 per cent reduction.

The figures that I have set out in relation to the discounts that are being introduced just now show that people will be able to have reduced fares that are, in many cases, similar to the off-peak fares. I will be delighted to send the member the East Kilbride figures so that he can promote the discounts that will be available for regular commuters, as he is, to his constituents in the wider central region.

ScotRail Peak Fares

2. Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide further details of its position on the reintroduction of peak fares on ScotRail trains. (S6O-03670)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): All MSPs and the public can read the report evaluating the peak fares removal trial on Transport Scotland's website and I would encourage them to do so. Although there was a limited increase in the number of passengers during the year, the scheme did not achieve one of the key aims of encouraging a significant modal shift from car to rail. It mainly benefited those people who already used rail, saving them hundreds if not thousands of pounds through subsidised discounted fares and, although some lower-income passengers benefited, it was mostly middle to higher-income passengers who did.

Given the financial challenges that we face and the significant additional subsidy that is required to continue the pilot versus its limited contribution towards the Government's missions of tackling climate change and child poverty, the pilot will end on 27 September. To mitigate the impact, we are reducing the cost of season tickets and flexipasses by 20 per cent, and I encourage all members to promote that.

Jeremy Balfour: The cabinet secretary clearly does not understand the economic argument that the cost for someone who lives in Edinburgh to go to Glasgow will go from £16.20 to £31.40, which will simply force more people into their cars. Was

a proper economic and environmental study carried out? If so, will it be debated in Parliament before the final decision is made?

Fiona Hyslop: The decision has been made. It was always a trial. In fact, we extended that trial not just once but twice. I was keen to see it succeed, which is why it was extended until September.

I will give an example of the promotions that I have already outlined in Parliament. A Glasgow to Edinburgh return is currently £16.20 all day; with the offer that has just been announced for 20 per cent savings on season tickets, a return will cost the equivalent of £14.82 per day for an annual season ticket holder if they are travelling five days a week. For those people who use a flexipass, that same return journey from Edinburgh to Glasgow will cost £21.25. Those discounts, from September, will offset the current situation between peak and off-peak fares. A £16.20 off-peak fare is very attractive compared with the figures that have been cited today.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will try to take a further couple of supplementaries, but they will need to be brief, as will the responses.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): My constituents are interested in the actual costs of their commute. Will the cabinet secretary set out what savings are available to the average commuter from Paisley using popular routes?

Fiona Hyslop: The specific savings that are available will be individual to the commuter and the route that they commute on. With the 20 per cent discount on season passes, for those commuting to work more frequently, it means that the equivalent fare per journey is, in some cases, lower than the off-peak fare and, in all cases, cheaper than paying for day-return tickets at any time.

Alternatively, flexipasses offer savings for those who do not commute regularly or frequently. Flexipasses consist of 10 tickets over a two-month period. For passengers on the Paisley Gilmour Street to Glasgow route, who currently enjoy a £4.90 all-day fare, if they travelled five days a week on an annual season ticket, it would be the equivalent of £3.25 per day. For those who travel less regularly and would prefer a flexipass, a daily fare would be £4.85, compared with the peak fare of £7.20.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I hope that the cabinet secretary will reflect on the deep disappointment of thousands and thousands of people across Scotland at the return of peak fares. Scrapping peak fares led to an increase in passengers—around 7 per cent—and more income for ScotRail. If bringing back peak fares results in passengers abandoning train

travel, that will mean less income for ScotRail. If that happens, will the cabinet secretary consider reversing the position?

Fiona Hyslop: I have already said that I was personally disappointed that a successful evaluation was not reported. The 6.8 per cent increase in use was at the maximum level. At the lower level, the assessment was less than 3 per cent. Unfortunately, the increase in journeys was at the beginning of the pilot; latterly, it tailed off. The assessment was made around the beginning of July, so it does not include the disruptive period. However, I have also said that, should the United Kingdom Government start to invest more in public services—and we get consequentials—I am open to reconsidering the position.

Decarbonising Transport

3. Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will review its goal of decarbonising transport, in light of its reported decision to increase fares and reduce services on Scotland's railways. (S6O-03671)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): We continue to decarbonise our transport with additional funding to support Scotland's electric vehicle charging network, and to support confident switching to electric cars. We are on target to provide 6,000 EV chargers by 2026.

On rail, we recently electrified the Barrhead line, and we are electrifying the East Kilbride line, with the provision of a travel interchange. Only yesterday, I announced approval for the procurement of a replacement train fleet for our intercity services. We have just announced funding of £41.7 million for 252 low-emission buses.

Unfortunately, the peak fare removal trial was unsuccessful: just 0.1 per cent of car journeys moved to rail. I am hopeful that the current temporary timetable will return to a full timetable shortly, and I am pleased that rail unions are recommending to their members that they accept the latest pay offer from ScotRail.

As the member has heard, I have taken steps to introduce discounts of 20 per cent on annual season tickets, and permanent discounts of 20 per cent on flexipasses.

Mark Griffin: Transport is now Scotland's biggest emitter of CO₂, yet rail passengers face a double whammy of fare hikes and cuts to more than 530 train services a day, compared with 2019. The United Kingdom Climate Change Committee has accused the Scottish Government of having no plan to reduce car kilometres, and the Government undermined the peak service trial with cuts to services and a lack of advertising.

Does the cabinet secretary accept that the Government has dismantled travellers' ability to make greener transport choices, is driving up costs on the railways and driving down services, and has, seemingly, abandoned its own goal of decarbonising our transport system?

Fiona Hyslop: I completely reject that analysis. I have talked about the increase in electric chargers. We have the most comprehensive electric charging system outside London, which is encouraging people to switch to electric vehicles. I also point out that, if we want to tackle car use, investing in buses would probably be our preference. We have limited choices. Do we invest in rail, where, as we know from the evaluation, the impact is more on middle to upper-income passengers and does not encourage more people to switch from car? Investment in other modes might be a better use of public funding. I am still committed to trying to make rail more attractive to more people. However, 75 per cent of passenger journeys on rail are already on electrified lines. We are improving what we are doing to support the bus fleet. That is a strong argument on decarbonisation. I am very pleased about that. I recently met the Climate Change Committee and discussed our proposals. The committee knows that we are proposing to bring forward a 20 per cent car reduction—

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary. We will need to have briefer responses.

We have a brief supplementary question from Beatrice Wishart.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): It is not just railways that need decarbonising. Ageing ferries are Shetland's biggest carbon emitters and many need to be replaced. Will the Scottish Government outline its policy on short subsea tunnels for Shetland, as such a project would be a contributor to the Scottish Government's goal of decarbonising transport?

Fiona Hyslop: Beatrice Wishart will know that it is the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government who is working with the Shetland ferry replacement task force. I am open to work on both ferries and tunnels. The big infrastructure spend that would be required on tunnels needs innovation—and it needs independence. Having the capability as a state to do big infrastructure projects such as subsea tunnels—the Faroe Islands rely on the Danish state to underwrite their tunnels—is a positive argument for changing how we fund our public services.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Will the cabinet secretary offer examples of achievements in the decarbonisation of Scotland's railway under the Scottish National Party and give an indication of

what impact the new intercity fleet is anticipated to have in that regard?

Fiona Hyslop: The new intercity fleet has a requirement to reduce emissions. As Evelyn Tweed will know from her constituency, the Stirling-Dunblane-Alloa line has been electrified. We know about the Edinburgh to Glasgow line. As I have already indicated, the electrification of the Glasgow to Barrhead line was completed recently, and we are working on the East Kilbride line.

Dumfries to Glasgow Train Service

4. **Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP):** To ask the Scottish Government when it last met with Network Rail and ScotRail with regards to improving the Dumfries-Glasgow train service. (S6O-03672)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): Transport Scotland officials regularly meet ScotRail and Network Rail Scotland to discuss rail services. Train services in Dumfries and Galloway have been improved through ScotRail's previous timetable changes, which resulted in a consistent hourly service between Dumfries and Carlisle and a two-hourly service between Dumfries and Glasgow. Like many other routes, the Dumfries to Glasgow service has been affected by the current ScotRail temporary reduced timetable. I am hopeful that there will be a return of normal services, and I am keen for that to happen as soon as possible.

Emma Harper: The Dumfries to Glasgow rail service is a vital link that connects communities in the south to Scotland's cities. Constituents report that the service is slow and that the fleet servicing the line is dated. We have heard that, if the journey time is faster, such as by electrification, Dumfries and other areas of Dumfries and Galloway could become commuter towns for Glasgow, helping to address depopulation. Will the cabinet secretary agree to meet me to discuss how we can improve that important line?

Fiona Hyslop: The Scottish Government is committed to decarbonising its passenger rail network. That is set out in our decarbonisation plan, which is a dynamic document that is due for a refresh. That is under way, and we will examine how decarbonisation can best be achieved. The plan commits to all passenger diesel trains being replaced. The order in which and programme by which that is done will depend on business cases and available budgets.

Although there is no timeline for the electrification of the line from Glasgow to Dumfries, and it is yet to be confirmed, I am happy to meet Emma Harper to discuss that important matter in more detail.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): It is not surprising that Emma Harper did not mention the 80 per cent fare hike for a ticket from Dumfries to Glasgow, which will rise from £24 to £43.

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers has highlighted the flawed trial evaluation process, with the first survey being carried out in December, when there are fewer commuters, and the second survey being carried out in July, when many commuters in Scotland are on holiday. How can the cabinet secretary justify the decision to scrap the trial, which will result in exorbitant fare increases for hard-pressed rural commuters?

Fiona Hyslop: I will send Finlay Carson more detail on the season ticket reduction for Carlisle to Dumfries, but I can briefly tell him that someone will pay £8.91 for a return journey if they use a season ticket five days a week. Using a flexipass and discount, they will pay £15.95.

On the evaluation process, I note that December is a busy time for the trains. We had not wanted to do the second evaluation survey during the July period. However, because of the Conservative Government calling the election, we were—[*Interruption.*]. No, genuinely, because it was a popular policy, we were asked not to do the research during the earlier June period and we had to postpone it to July. That is a matter of fact, whether Finlay Carson likes it or not. I did not like it and he does not like it, but it is a matter of fact.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): Can the cabinet secretary explain why commuters who use the Dumfries to Glasgow Nith valley line face the largest hike in rail fares when peak fares are reintroduced? A peak-time return from Dumfries to Carlisle will increase from £7.60 to £23.50. That is a 211 per cent increase. Nowhere else in Scotland do people face such big differences between peak and off-peak fares as will be experienced by those who travel from Dumfries station. Why are people in my area being discriminated against as a result of the utterly illogical way in which ScotRail fares are set?

Fiona Hyslop: I am happy to ask ScotRail to provide an explanation directly to Colin Smyth. However, he makes a very important point about anomalies between fares and fare miles. One of the things that we did in taking rail into public ownership was to require ScotRail and Scottish Rail Holdings to provide a system that delivers a fairer system of fares. I am due to receive a report on that next year. That does not address the point that Colin Smyth makes as of now, but I will specifically take it up with ScotRail.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We are 20 minutes in and we are only halfway through the

questions, so the questions will have to be briefer, as will the responses.

Pothole Repairs

5. Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to assist local authorities with repairing potholes, in light of reports of the detrimental impact that large numbers of potholes are having on drivers across Scotland. (S6O-03673)

The Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity (Jim Fairlie): I very much appreciate the road maintenance challenges and the importance of a safe, well-performing road network. I certainly do not minimise the importance of the point that the member has raised.

However, local road maintenance is the responsibility of local authorities, which allocate resources based on their local priorities. The 2024-25 local government settlement increased local authorities' share of the budget and delivered record funding of more than £14 billion, which represents a real-terms increase of 2.5 per cent. The independent Accounts Commission confirmed that that followed real-terms increases in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

It is for locally elected representatives to decide how best to deliver services to their communities. The Scottish Government has increased the maintenance budget for the trunk road network, for which it is responsible.

Pam Gosal: The number of potholes recorded by local authorities is on the rise, with 2,463 having been recorded in East Dunbartonshire alone. Years of brutal funding cuts mean that our local authorities lack the resources to afford essential road repairs, and we know that the Scottish Government is set to make damaging cuts to the budget. How does the Scottish Government intend to address the many worries of drivers, who pay high prices for the damage that is caused by potholes and fear that the issue might never be fixed?

Jim Fairlie: For the sake of brevity, I will repeat the point that I just made. Such decisions are for local authorities. The Government has increased the amount of money that is provided to local authorities, and local authorities will prioritise their spend.

A75 (Safety)

6. Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government what action it is taking to improve road safety on the A75. (S6O-03674)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is committed

to improving safety on our trunk roads, including the A75. Since 2007, more than £152 million has been invested in the A75 to ensure its safe and efficient operation.

We are progressing a number of actions to further improve safety on the A75, including the introduction of a speed management scheme on the A75 at Crocketford, the introduction of signalisation at Cuckoo Bridge roundabout and junction improvements on the A75 at Haugh of Urr. Our annual assessment of trunk road safety performance has identified sections of the A75 by Mouswald, Glenluce and Twynholm for further investigation this financial year.

Oliver Mundell: I thank the cabinet secretary for her answer and for mentioning Mouswald. I would like the whole road to be dualled, but it is clear that that is not going to happen under the Scottish National Party. Therefore, will the cabinet secretary take away and consider the very reasonable request from some deeply concerned and desperate constituents at Mouswald for a couple of double white lines to be introduced, to prevent dangerous overtaking and potentially save lives at that location?

Fiona Hyslop: I will undertake to look at that. I can tell Oliver Mundell that Transport Scotland has incorporated the Mouswald junction into the investigation on the A75 from just west of Breconrae to east of Craigie Bank, which is scheduled to be undertaken in 2025-26.

COP29 (Priorities)

7. **Humza Yousaf:** To ask the Scottish Government what its priorities are for COP29, which will take place in Baku later this year. (S6O-03675)

The Acting Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Energy (Gillian Martin): Scotland is committed to playing our part at COPs, working with international partners to secure a global transition to a net zero and resilient future in a way that is fair and just for all.

Although our plans for COP29 are still being developed, we anticipate that they will focus on driving international action on equitable and transparent climate finance; using our leadership of Regions4 and the Under2 Coalition to build climate ambition and action; showcasing our net zero journey; and playing our part, as good global citizens, to advance international relations.

As is usual at COPs, in ensuring that the voices of women, young people and the global south are heard at COP29, Scotland will continue to play a bridging role across all those aims.

Humza Yousaf: Scotland can rightly pride itself on being a pioneer of the loss and damage fund,

as it became the first country in the global north to commit funds for loss and damage at COP26. By doing so, Scotland recognised that those in the global south are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis.

Does the cabinet secretary agree that, if the fight against climate injustice is to be meaningfully continued, not only must the loss and damage funds that were committed to at COP28 last year be distributed as quickly as possible to communities ravaged by the climate crisis, but that must be done in a way that does not further increase the debt burden for countries in the global south?

Gillian Martin: I absolutely agree. The Scottish Government's climate justice approach recognises our moral responsibility to support vulnerable communities in the global south to address climate-induced loss and damage. The communities that are least responsible for the global climate crisis are often most severely affected by it.

Scotland welcomed the agreement at COP28 on operationalising the loss and damage fund of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. I recognise the fundamental role that Humza Yousaf played in that and the leadership that he has shown on loss and damage. The fund must be urgently mobilised to ensure rapid and equitable access to sufficient funding. It is crucial that a portion of the fund is ring-fenced to provide finance directly to communities in the form of grants, not loans. The urgency of the climate crisis and its disproportional impact demand that we act now.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will take a couple of brief supplementary questions.

Sarah Boyack (Lothian) (Lab): Given the sustained failure by the Scottish Government to meet our climate targets, would demonstrating how we could reduce our homes, buildings, transport and land emissions not be a fundamental contribution for us to make if we are to have credibility at COP29?

Gillian Martin: Sarah Boyack will hear no disagreement from me, except on her first point. We are demonstrating our credibility. The programme for government, which was announced yesterday, set out some of the actions are being taken not only in my portfolio but across many portfolios, including that of the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, who is sitting beside me, and in land use. A climate change bill will be brought to Parliament and a heat in buildings bill is also part of the programme for government.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): Does the cabinet secretary think that the Scottish National Party Government can go to

COP29 with a single ounce of credibility now that it has ditched its climate change targets and has this week diverted £460 million of ScotWind cash away from the climate emergency and towards filling the black hole in the SNP budget?

Gillian Martin: Mr Lumsden will not be surprised to hear that I do not agree in the slightest. We have already halved our emissions and have plans to do an awful lot more. We are bringing forward a new climate change bill that will mean we will have a credible plan towards 2045, as we always have done. This is a high priority for the First Minister and his Government. It is threaded through not only my portfolio but every single portfolio in Government and the action that must be taken will be taken across the board.

A9 Dualling

8. Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on the dualling of the A9. (S6O-03676)

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport (Fiona Hyslop): The Scottish Government is progressing with the A9 dualling delivery plan that was set out to Parliament in December 2023. Work will begin on the Tomatin to Moy section in the coming months, following contract award in July. That will be the start of continuous work on A9 dualling until the programme is completed. I announced the three shortlisted bidders for the next section, from the Tay crossing to Ballinluig, in August. Once those two sections are completed by the end of in 2028, 45 per cent of the A9 between Perth and Inverness will be dualled.

Alexander Stewart: The Scottish National Party's failure to dual the A9 is a complete betrayal of the people of Scotland. Between January 2020 and December 2023, non-dualled sections of the A9 accounted for 90 per cent of fatal accidents. That travesty comes solely at the hands of the SNP. Does the cabinet secretary accept that? What guarantees are being given that the dualling of the A9 will be completed by 2035 at the latest?

Fiona Hyslop: I can give that commitment, because it is set out in the plan that we reported to Parliament last December. I am conscious of the issue of fatalities. There have been different numbers of fatalities in different years.

It is really important to recognise that the work that we are doing means that contracts are already being let and that work is commencing. As I said, there will be continuous work on the A9 until it is completed in 2035, with 45 per cent of that to be done by 2028.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I call Fergus Ewing to ask a brief supplementary question.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): [*Inaudible.*—bringing forward the completion date for dualling of the A9, which is presently 2035. I ask the cabinet secretary what progress is being made on that plea and consideration thereof. Secondly, will she make an oral statement in Parliament to provide a full update about such progress for a swifter completion?

Fiona Hyslop: I am afraid that I missed the beginning of the member's contribution. However, he and others met me and the First Minister to discuss the A9 dualling and I undertake, as the First Minister did, to keep the programme under review to identify whether there is any way to make any progress in terms of speed. The other issue that the member raised at that meeting was the ordering. We have to balance market capacity, impacts on road users and the challenging financial constraints, but the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee will receive regular updates on the A9, as we have promised. Looking at acceleration would require careful consideration and it will not be immediate but, in keeping that under review, I undertake to keep the member and, indeed, Parliament informed of any progress.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I apologise to those whom I was unable to call. As members will see, we have overrun quite a bit and we need to move on to the next item of business. There will be a brief pause to allow members on the front benches to change positions.

Programme for Government 2024-25 (Eradicating Child Poverty)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Liam McArthur): The next item of business is a debate on motion S6M-14322, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the programme for government—eradicating child poverty. I invite members who wish to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak button.

15:02

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Ending child poverty is the single greatest priority for this Government and is, I hope, a truly national mission that is supported across the chamber. I am pleased to be opening this debate as education secretary in what I hope is a demonstration of the cross-Government approach that we are taking to that mission. Ending child poverty is a job not just for me, the social justice secretary, the health secretary or any one of my colleagues; it is a mission for all of us in Government at all levels.

We undoubtedly approach that mission in what are clearly challenging circumstances. The Scottish Government's budget is under the most severe and sustained pressure since this Parliament was reconvened in 1999. However, it is worth reminding Parliament that it is in that challenging context that we are already taking considerable action to alleviate child poverty within our current devolved powers.

We are investing around £3 billion per year in our mission to eradicate child poverty, address the cost of living crisis and break the cycle of poverty, and we know that that action is making a difference. Modelling that was published in February estimates that 100,000 children will be kept out of relative poverty this year by Scottish Government policies such as the Scottish child payment, with relative child poverty levels estimated to be 10 percentage points lower than they would otherwise have been. As Professor Morag Treanor from the University of Glasgow has observed, the Scottish child payment has been a game changer for Scotland. She noted that

“Levels of child poverty in Scotland will drop faster”

and

“further than they will in the rest of the UK, particularly England, because of this payment”.

However, there is much more that we need to do in order to fully eradicate child poverty.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): The First Minister made quite a deal yesterday about the

interconnected, whole-family approach that is required in order to help families, but there was no reference in the programme for government or in his speech to the whole family wellbeing fund, which was to be £500 million up until 2026. It has caused some concern that there is no specific reference to that. Can the cabinet secretary put our minds at rest and commit to that £500 million by 2026?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Rennie might know that I am recused from issues to do with The Promise as my wife sits on the oversight board. However, I am sure that Shirley-Anne Somerville will respond to that specific point when she sums up the debate.

I mentioned that this year's programme for government reinforces our commitment to work in partnership with local government and stakeholders across whole-family support, which Mr Rennie mentioned, employability, childcare, education, and housing. That is because the Government alone will not eradicate child poverty; it will take all of us, across Scotland, working together, united in focus and purpose, to deliver the change that is required.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): The cabinet secretary talks about family provision. One of the family provisions that allow disabled people to go out is the provision of changing places toilets. However, the Scottish Government announced on Tuesday that the £10 million fund for new changing places toilets had been removed. How does that help families, particularly those in poverty, to go out and access services in our cities and towns?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Balfour raises an extremely valid point, and I recognise the challenge in this instance. He will also recognise the real challenges that the Scottish Government faces at the current time, which are largely driven by decisions taken elsewhere that have driven inflation to such levels that we have had to, for example, settle record levels of local government pay deals. I think that that was the right thing to do, but it means that there is less finance for other projects, such as the one that Mr Balfour mentions. I also recognise the importance of that fund in my constituency and in other places in Scotland. As with all the funding that we are considering in the Government, if additional funding becomes available, we will prioritise it to support the families who are most in need.

I want to talk about some of the support and investment that we are already providing in Scotland—investment that does not necessarily exist in other parts of the United Kingdom at the current time. For example, we have established an emergency fund to support councils in removing the impact of school meal debt on families and, building on our existing partnerships in Glasgow,

Clackmannanshire and Dundee, we are investing in five more place-based partnerships. We are also investing in local projects to tackle child poverty through a second round of our child poverty practice accelerator fund.

We know that breaking the cycle of poverty means supporting the next generation to thrive and helping parents to get on in fair work. Of course, Scotland is the only part of the UK to already offer 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare to all three and four-year-olds and to eligible two-year-olds, regardless of their parents' working status. That provision of extra ELC is helping to save families, on average, £5,500 per child per year, which is what they would have to pay if they paid for that care themselves.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Will the member take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to make some progress.

We know that that approach is making a substantial difference already, by saving families money and, importantly, allowing women to return to the workplace. In 2024-25, we will continue to invest around £1 billion in high-quality ELC, and we will continue to expand access to funded childcare for families who need it most through our work in the six early adopter communities. In those early adopter communities, since 2022, we have been working with families who are most at risk of living in poverty to provide them with the school-age child services that they need, and families tell us that that funding is making a difference. It is helping to get them back into work and to alleviate pressure on household budgets.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will the member take an intervention?

Jenny Gilruth: I will, but I am mindful of time, Presiding Officer.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The cabinet secretary will be aware that a survey that was conducted by Pregnant Then Screwed found that a quarter of mothers on maternity leave who are eligible for the new Government-funded childcare scheme have been told that they cannot apply for the free hours, even though they are eligible for them, and that, as a result, they will have to return to work early. How does the cabinet secretary respond to that?

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I can give you the time back for the intervention, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: Thank you, Presiding Officer.

I am happy to work with the member and, of course, with Natalie Don-Innes, the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise, to resolve the matter that she has raised. However, it

is important to note that the provision of 1,140 hours in Scotland is quite a different level from what is available in other parts of the UK and that, further, as a result of the approach of the Conservatives, the provision in other parts of the UK is linked to having parents in work. We do not discriminate on that basis in Scotland—we have a much more equitable offer. As I said, I am happy to work with the member to support that work further.

I mentioned that we are delivering childcare, and I want to talk about wraparound school-age childcare, which is hugely important for parents and which we are providing to support around 600 children from 500 families through the early adopter projects that I mentioned. The programme for government also highlights an example of the difference that that project in Dundee is making to one mum who has been able to get back into work with the right support and funded childcare—that wraparound approach that we know works and helps to support parents into sustained positive destinations.

It is imperative that we continue to drive an increase in the take-up of funded early learning and childcare for eligible two-year-olds. Our local authorities take that very seriously, and we will continue to work with them to focus on boosting take-up among families who are most at risk of poverty.

Over 2024-25, we will continue to support the extra time programme, investing £4 million in a partnership with the Scottish Football Association to deliver before-school, after-school and breakfast clubs through 31 football clubs spread all over the country. That funding is providing 3,000 targeted free places each week for children, who are benefiting from access to food, activities and support while their parents are more easily able to work.

I turn now to school and post-16 education. By investing in children and young people's education to enable them to begin work or further or higher education when they leave school, we can help to break the poverty-related cycle. Through our continued investment in the Scottish attainment challenge, the poverty-related gap for young people leaving school and going on to a positive destination has reduced by 60 per cent since 2009. Further, there have been record levels of attainment in literacy and numeracy in our primary 7 pupils over the past year. As this year's exam results show, there has been a 25 per cent increase this year alone in the number of technical and vocational qualifications achieved. That is a true mark of progress, as more young people are able to choose non-traditional routes in their qualifications to exhibit their success.

There has also been extraordinary success with the widening access agenda, in partnership with our universities, with record numbers of students from our poorest communities going on to university, supported by free university tuition. Indeed, the most recent data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, from August, showed a 12 per cent increase this year in acceptances from the 20 per cent most deprived areas of Scotland. That is a record that we, our universities and, most importantly, our students can be proud of.

Our support to young people is not just academic. We understand that families need our support at this time, and we are taking strong action to reduce the cost of the school day for families. That is why we have extended free school meals, saving families £400 per year for every eligible child taking those meals. As was confirmed yesterday, we will focus the next stage in our efforts on free school meal expansion for those children who need it most. That is why, even in the extremely tough, financially circumstances that we face as a result of austerity from the United Kingdom Government, we are investing to deliver free school meal expansion for primary 6 and 7 pupils in receipt of the Scottish child payment. That is real action in our mission to eradicate child poverty, which I hope everyone in the Parliament can support.

Very shortly in the coming weeks, we will publish school clothing and uniform guidance, which will focus on measures to support schools to design and implement affordable policies that recognise the individual needs and identity of our pupils. We will continue to provide funding to all local authorities for the removal of core curriculum charges for all primary and secondary pupils, which is worth £8 million in this financial year alone.

We are investing £1 billion during this parliamentary session through the Scottish attainment challenge, helping schools to fund, for example, income maximisation officers at Braes high school in Falkirk, supporting families to access the benefits that they are entitled to. That investment is also supporting Fair Isle primary school in Fife, which is using some of its pupil equity funding for a family worker to support parents in boosting their household budgets. Elgin high school in Moray is further tackling the cost of the school day by introducing a food-to-go scheme.

Throughout this speech, I have referred to the need for joint working if we are to succeed in our mission to end child poverty: joint working within Government, joint working with councils, joint working with the third sector and working directly with our communities. I now need to touch on the

joint working that would be most immediately impactful: genuine joint working with the UK Government. As the Parliament knows, the UK Government has powers at its fingertips right now that could alleviate child poverty. At the stroke of a pen, it could lift hundreds of thousands of children in Scotland out of poverty by taking the obvious step of lifting the two-child cap.

I am again asking the Parliament to come together and call on the UK Government to do exactly that. I am speaking in particular to colleagues on the Labour benches today, because I do not believe that there is a single person on those benches who truly believes that the two-child limit is the right policy. As members of the Parliament, each of us sees the impact of that policy in our constituencies every day. Today we have the opportunity to speak with one voice, and the people who sent us here will expect us to take it. The two-child limit must go, and it must go now.

There are other costs that the Scottish Government incurs, primarily those associated with mitigation. Indeed, it is worth reminding the Parliament that the Government is spending more than £1 billion mitigating the impacts of 14 years of UK Government policy, such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. That is action that we are proud to take to protect our people and to protect families in Scotland, but we should not have to take it. The purpose of this Parliament is not to ameliorate bad decision making from Westminster; the purpose of this Parliament should be to govern in the best interests of the people of Scotland. However, we are spending millions of pounds this year alone to mitigate UK Government welfare cuts, including the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. That is money that could and should have been spent on our schools or further ambitious anti-poverty measures.

Rather than those policies being mitigated in Scotland, the new UK Labour Government has the chance to end them at source. Indeed, Labour has some tough decisions fast approaching, because the great responsibility of Government comes with great accountability. I warn Labour colleagues that, if they are not careful, the Tory bedroom tax will become the Labour bedroom tax, the two-child cap will become Labour's two-child cap and the child poverty to which those reprehensible policies lead will become Labour's child poverty. There is an opportunity for the new UK Government to change course. It will find a willing partner in the Scottish Government, but emulating Tory austerity will not help Scotland's children. Things have to get better.

Eradicating child poverty is the golden thread that runs through this year's programme for government. It is a priority for all our portfolios. Although we have made good progress, we know

that there is more to do and we remain resolutely committed to delivering the change that is needed. We will leave no stone unturned across Government as we seek to lift every child out of poverty. I ask each member of every party in the Parliament to work with us on that national mission.

I move,

That the Parliament notes the actions set out in the Programme for Government 2024-25 that focus on eradicating child poverty as the single greatest priority for the Scottish Government; recognises that sustained and cohesive effort is needed across all levels of government and in all parts of society to deliver on this national mission, especially at a time when the public finances are under acute pressure after 14 years of austerity; welcomes continued investment of around £3 billion in 2024-25 to eradicate poverty, mitigate the impacts of the cost of living crisis and invest in prevention to break the cycle of poverty; notes analysis of the Child Poverty Action Group, which estimates that low-income families in Scotland will be around £28,000 better off by the time that their child turns 18 when compared to other families across the UK; further notes modelling that estimates that 100,000 children will be kept out of relative poverty this year as a result of Scottish Government policies such as the Scottish Child Payment; recognises the Scottish Government's commitment to working constructively with the UK Government to end child poverty once and for all, and agrees that the UK Government has the opportunity to lift thousands of children out of poverty in Scotland by taking action in the Autumn Budget to remove the two-child limit.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Thank you, cabinet secretary.

I advise members that we have a little time in hand, so I encourage members who have not yet pressed their request-to-speak button but want to speak in the debate to do so now. I also encourage members who wish to make an intervention to press their intervention button, not least because it is helpful for those who join us online.

15:16

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I thank the many organisations that provided useful briefings ahead of the debate.

Yesterday, during the programme for government statement, the First Minister said:

"No child should have their opportunities, development, health and wellbeing and future curtailed by the material wealth of their family—not ever, and certainly not today, in a modern and prosperous society such as Scotland."

I agree. We all want a Scotland where everyone and every child can realise their potential.

The programme for government was an opportunity to take stock of the Government's successes and failures. I agree with the First Minister when he says:

"families thrive when they are supported by co-ordinated holistic services that meet their needs and are easy to access."—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2024; c 24.]

That is why I am disappointed that health and housing have had such a low priority in the child poverty actions and are not even referenced in the Government motion.

After 17 years of the Scottish National Party being in government and having full control over those policy areas, the facts speak for themselves. The percentage of children in Scotland who are waiting more than 12 weeks for medical care has increased by almost 50 per cent. The total number of children on waiting lists sits at more than 10,000, which is a 114 per cent increase. To borrow from the cabinet secretary, those are SNP waiting lists. The number of children who are homeless and living in temporary accommodation has reached more than 16,000—that is SNP child homelessness.

The Government is not making the progress that it promised. The health and housing situation for children—often the most vulnerable children in our society—is only getting worse. There is a cross-party consensus in the Parliament and, perhaps more importantly, in the charities and public bodies that work in communities across Scotland, that we should take action to make change in that area.

The Government motion states:

"sustained and cohesive effort is needed across all levels of government and in all parts of society to deliver on this national mission".

I agree with that. However, if ministers are serious about eliminating child poverty and about that being the Government's number 1 priority, we need a renewed focus on outcomes, not on Government processes, which is all that we have seen to date.

Alongside Jackie Baillie, I recently co-chaired a parliamentary round table that was organised by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health to discuss the recommendations in its report "Worried and Waiting: A review of paediatric waiting times in Scotland 2024". I have to say that, along with many MSPs who are in the chamber, I was concerned by what the professionals had to say. I make the sincere plea to the First Minister to meet the RCPCH urgently to consider some of its recommendations on the need to make child poverty and child health outcomes go hand in hand. We need action. The waiting times that we see are the next big scandal facing the Government.

I know that, since the pandemic, many MSPs will have started to receive examples in their casework of unacceptable failures to deliver health and mental wellbeing care and support on time.

We need to see action on that. I request that the First Minister urgently looks at the recommendations that the royal college has outlined, which it would be fully realistic and affordable for the Scottish Government to take forward. One of those recommendations is to conduct a full review of the child health workforce to ensure that it is sufficiently resourced and funded, and specifically to look at the creation of a bespoke child health workforce strategy. We can all agree that those things would make a difference. I would also ask the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care to consider the challenges and make a statement to Parliament on them, because they are only getting worse on the Government's watch.

I have been disappointed to date in the limited progress that has been made by Government to end the practice of children and young people being placed in adult mental health services. I have held round-table meetings and we have had meetings all summer, yet ministers have not acted on the challenges and the practice continues. We need leadership. I hope that the health secretary, although he is not here in the chamber, will look at how we act on that.

The housing emergency is one of the key areas that the Government needs to act on. I welcome some of the changes to the Housing (Scotland) Bill outlined in the programme for government and I look forward to meeting the Minister for Housing to discuss them. In many ways, however, the changes that have been proposed are fixing the mess that was created during the period of the SNP-Green coalition Government. During the consideration of the national planning framework, I, alongside industry leaders, warned ministers that without a pipeline of land supply for new homes, we would see housing developments and home completions significantly reducing, which is what has happened.

As the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations points out in its briefing, the pipeline of new social homes is slowing to worrying levels. Housing association starts were just 2,073 homes in 2023, which is the lowest number since 1988. The proposals that the Government is now making look almost identical to what I tried to get into the national planning framework, so I welcome much of that. However, the mid-market rent sector has collapsed in Scotland and the pledge for 2,800 homes is low in comparison with what can, and should be, achieved.

The rent controls policy, although politically well meaning in the short term, has had long-term consequences, which we need to accept. As a result, renters, particularly in the capital, are being priced out of homes—that is especially the case for new tenants who are trying to find a home.

Missing from the actions to tackle the housing crisis are new actions on void and empty properties, and I know that many SNP members who serve on the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee are as frustrated about the issue as I am. In Edinburgh, there are 3,000 council-owned properties that are sitting empty. That is totally unacceptable. That number has remained at that level for years now, including during the housing emergency we are experiencing in the capital. One of my requests to ministers is for them to take forward a joint piece of work with councils to urgently audit and allocate those properties to get them back into use.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): The member mentioned that he was due to meet the Minister for Housing soon. I am sure that during that meeting, the minister will furnish him with the details of the work that we are undertaking with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to look at the issue of voids. That includes what national Government can do and what the responsibility of local government is because, quite frankly, there have been voids in some councils for too long, and it is their responsibility to tackle them. We are also looking at what energy providers, for example, can do, because one of the main challenges relates to the meter changes that need to take place. We are working on the problem, and will furnish the member with more details.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: I will give Miles Briggs the time back.

Miles Briggs: I welcome that, and I have been in constant discussion with the Minister for Housing.

We also need to look at the new models that have not been taken forward. For example, during the summer, I met the charity Right There in Glasgow. It works to prevent people from becoming homeless and being separated from their loved ones and it has taken over the leases of properties. Many charities are looking to provide extra-care housing, which would make a huge difference. In the past, councils have used such models, but we have not seen as many of those types of models being used. I hope that a new model can be used, because there should be no homes that sit empty for years on end, as there are in the capital. Perth and Kinross Council should be praised for the work that it has been doing with the PKC lets initiative in order to bring empty homes back into use. However, we need to see changes.

I turn to yesterday's announcement that SNP ministers plan not to deliver on the commitment to expand free school meals to all primary-age pupils. The Scottish Conservatives championed

that policy at the 2021 election, and there was—I believe—cross-party consensus that it would have a positive impact on child poverty and address stigma, as was raised during First Minister’s question time today. The promise to expand eligibility to all pupils was made in last year’s programme for government, and MSPs on all sides of the chamber were working to deliver on that.

We on the Conservative side of the chamber want to see the policy delivered, and we have looked to models to support the continuation of that, not just during the school week but in the summer holidays. I am extremely disappointed, therefore, that ministers have taken that action, and I hope that we see a change in that regard.

The First Minister said yesterday that the

“Government does not command a majority in this Parliament”.—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2024; c 23.]

Scottish Conservatives want to work cross-party in the Parliament to ensure that there is progress on the issue of free school meals, and that that is fixed at the time of the budget, if not before. Resources have been allocated to councils, and I hope that the First Minister will be open to looking at how we restore and deliver the policy and at the costs that are associated with its delivery—through, for example, a cross-party committee.

Finally, I am disappointed that the Government has decided not to proceed with a learning disability, autism and neurodivergence bill, nor with a human rights bill. Ministers had made pledges to many MSPs that both those bills would include important changes and legislative vehicles to deliver reforms—where they will now go, we do not know.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: You need to conclude.

Miles Briggs: Finally, I note that the programme for government was a missed opportunity to develop opportunities to end child poverty. We need to work across parties to do that.

I move amendment S6M-14322.2, to leave out from “14” to end and insert:

“17 years of financial mismanagement by the Scottish Government; notes that 26% of children live in poverty in Scotland, and that this rate has remained largely unchanged since 2007; recognises that the number of children in temporary accommodation has reached 10,000, which has increased by 138% since 2014; urges the Scottish Government to recognise that child poverty has a detrimental impact on the health of children, and notes that, by September 2023, the percentage of children waiting over 12 weeks for medical care increased to 49.8%, and that the total number of paediatric waits was 10,512, which was a 114.6% increase from October 2012; calls on the Scottish Government to recognise that the poverty-related attainment gap poses another barrier for children, and

notes that, in 2024, the pass rates at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher were at record low levels since 2016; urges the Scottish Ministers to accept the findings of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee’s report, Addressing Child Poverty Through Parental Employment, and calls on the Scottish Government to deliver a holistic strategy for tackling child poverty, which ensures that no child in Scotland goes without safe housing, modern and efficient local healthcare, and high-quality educational opportunities.”

15:26

Paul O’Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): As always when we debate child poverty, I start by highlighting the consensus that—as we have already heard this afternoon—there is no more important mission or goal, and no more important subject that we debate in the chamber.

The goal to eradicate child poverty, as the Government’s motion sets out, is laudable, and members will find no disagreement from those of us on the Labour benches on the need for a national mission in that regard. However, we have to be realistic, because this is a debate on the programme for government, and reflect that the Scottish Government has been saying that it wants to take meaningful action on child poverty for the past 17 years.

Indeed, the First Minister said yesterday that he has been in this Parliament for every single programme for government. I have been in Parliament for only four programmes for government, under three SNP First Ministers; two of them were in the chamber earlier, and I know that the current First Minister has had to go to another engagement.

The reality is that, each time that there has been a programme for government under those successive First Ministers, tackling child poverty has been at the top of the agenda, and yet we know that, year after year, things have not been getting better—in fact, they have often been getting worse. We have had reannouncement after reannouncement of policy, and very little in the way of new and innovative thinking. That is borne out by much of the commentary that we have seen in the past day or so on the programme for government.

We should look at the numbers: 30,000 children are in relative poverty, which is more children in relative poverty than when the SNP came into office 17 years ago. It is 260,000—

Jenny Gilruth: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul O’Kane: In a moment—I will just make this point.

That is 260,000 children in total across Scotland, according to the most recent figures.

They will go through the important years of their lives without many of the essentials that they need.

I give way to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

Jenny Gilruth: I am listening to the member recount the challenges that the Scottish Government faces. I hope that he will also be mindful that the Scottish Government does not exist in a financial silo. In February this year, the Child Poverty Action Group noted that “Holyrood policies are working”, but that the

“UK government must also invest in social security to reverse long-term damage to living standards, starting by scrapping the two-child limit and benefit cap, and restoring the value of child benefit.”

Does the member agree with that?

Paul O’Kane: The cabinet secretary and I debated issues around child poverty five or six times in the chamber pre-election, and each time that we did so, I made it clear that the financial decisions and ruinous policies of the Conservative Party have led to an exacerbation of poverty. That is what the new Labour Government, eight weeks in, is going to set about beginning to fix.

We have to fix the foundations of our economy, and ensure that—crucially—work pays. That is why one of the first actions that the Labour Government took was to instruct the Low Pay Commission to look at how we make the national minimum wage a living wage, and at how we implement a new deal for working people that will create security at work and ensure that zero-hours contracts are gone and people do not have to worry about working two or three insecure jobs.

We already know—and, crucially, the organisations that the cabinet secretary referenced would agree—that in-work poverty is a serious issue that we need to deal with if we are to address child poverty. She made a point about the role of the social security system at UK level. We now have a child poverty task force at UK level that is considering reform of universal credit, which does not work and needs fundamental reform. That is the work that Labour has undertaken, within just eight weeks of forming the UK Government.

However, as I have said, the SNP has had 17 years. Quite frankly, the numbers that I have read out illustrate 17 years of failure on many of those policies. Reading the programme for government, we have a sense that there is no new thinking and very little imagination. We have seen the broken promises that have been made, which members across the chamber have already referenced.

It is not just the Labour Party that has formed such an analysis of the Government’s work on

those issues. Indeed, the Scottish Government’s own Poverty and Inequality Commission has said that progress to reach the legally binding targets that were agreed by all parties in the chamber has been

“slow or not evident at all”

and that

“without immediate and significant action, the Scottish Government will not meet the 2030 targets”.

Therefore, much more needs to happen to drive our progress towards those targets. In their speeches, members will outline much of that in more detail, but it is clear that we need to have more funding and support for local authorities to ensure that they can deliver at local level on tackling poverty and inequality for children and young people. We need to ensure that we continue to move forward on early learning and childcare. I do not think that the reannouncement of reannouncements on pilot funding will be enough to move the dial in that area.

Alongside the work that the UK Government is doing on wages and on secure work, we need to ensure that more people in Scotland can get into work. In particular, we need to support the work that is being done across the third sector, in very difficult circumstances. Just this morning, the Social Justice and Social Security Committee heard about the challenges that exist in the third sector, and I urge the cabinet secretary to read that evidence. We must ensure that the excellent work that is being done, in particular to help women to return to the workplace, is being well supported and well funded.

More of the same is not going to cut it. This morning I was surprised to hear the Deputy First Minister on “Good Morning Scotland” saying, of the programme for government in relation to child poverty:

“It does not always take brand-new initiatives. Sometimes it is just about focusing on the things that are working really well.”

It would be useful if the cabinet secretary could explain what could have been working so well when 30,000 more children have been living in poverty over that 17-year period.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Will the member take an intervention?

Paul O’Kane: I think that I am now in my last minute, but I will take the intervention if I can have the time back, Presiding Officer.

The Deputy Presiding Officer (Annabelle Ewing): Yes, indeed.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Despite the circumstances that we are in with the finances, the Government’s programme is keeping 100,000

children out of poverty. I would say that that is a success. We could do more if only we were without the shackles imposed by Westminster.

Paul O’Kane: It would be useful to understand how that figure has been arrived at, because the Deputy First Minister had trouble articulating it this morning on “Good Morning Scotland”. It would also be useful if, in her summing up, the cabinet secretary could explain how the modelling has reached that figure, because a number of organisations are concerned about the number that she has used.

I am aware that I need to conclude, Presiding Officer. I imagine that there will be much more to say in the coming weeks and months as the programme for government begins to move forward. I am very clear that members on this side of the chamber will work constructively with the Government, as it has sought to do with the UK Government. I encourage it to engage with the child poverty task force at UK level and to support action to create a new deal for working people and improve wages across the UK. There can be no more important issue than tackling and eradicating child poverty, and we must focus all our energy and resource on that.

I move amendment S6M-14322.1, to leave out from first “notes” to end and insert:

“agrees that child poverty should be a national mission for the Scottish Government, but deeply regrets that, after 17 years of a Scottish National Party (SNP) administration, there are 30,000 more children in poverty; acknowledges that child poverty rates across the UK have risen under the economic mismanagement of the previous Conservative administration, but also recognises that Scotland has its own legally-binding child poverty reduction targets that the SNP administration is likely to miss, despite successive First Ministers declaring action on child poverty to be a priority; notes the damning assessment by Scotland’s Poverty and Inequality Commission that progress from the SNP administration in tackling child poverty “is slow or not evident at all”; is deeply concerned by the Scottish Government’s decision to cut measures that act as barriers to poverty, including cuts to the affordable housing budget, parental employability schemes, the Fuel Insecurity Fund and the freeze to the Scottish Welfare Fund; condemns cuts to education funding, including the Pupil Equity Fund, digital device provision and attainment funding in the poorest local authorities; agrees that there is a need to tackle in-work poverty and so welcomes the work of the UK Labour administration to strengthen workers’ rights, review Universal Credit, build a fairer social security system, and deliver a pay rise for 200,000 of the lowest-paid people in Scotland with a genuine living wage; welcomes the establishment of a cross-government Child Poverty Ministerial Taskforce by the UK Government, and encourages the Scottish Government to work collaboratively to tackle the root causes of poverty across Scotland.”

15:34

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): This is a time of want and of need.

People are afraid. Some are angry, and some are beyond desperate. Far too many children are hungry, cold, sleeping in unsafe places and excluded from going on the ordinary trips and having the toys that their classmates take for granted. Westminster politicians who, before they were elected, were telling stories of cohesion and solidarity are now in government, speaking the language of austerity. They wear their self-imposed fiscal policies like medals of military virtue, justifying cuts that bite to the bone.

Scotland, it seems, is imprisoned in a cage of consequentials, unable, as is claimed, to break the consensus and do what its people—its children in poverty—need it to do. I am not talking about 2024, although I could be. Thirteen years ago, in 2011, the Christie commission published its powerful, wise and widely acclaimed report. It was a time of conscious austerity, when social, economic and political pressures weighed heavily on Scotland’s communities. We were warned that budgets would buckle unless Scotland embraced a radically new collaborative culture—one that recognised the devastating effect of inequality and learned to prioritise preventative measures.

Tragically, that has not happened. As Mary Glasgow of Children 1st pointed out three years ago, marking the 10th anniversary of the report,

“While Christie couldn’t predict the pandemic, he clearly understood that when public finances were tightest, the need for investment in prevention was greatest. Yet when budgets are squeezed, preventative spend is always the first to go.”

We can see that now, urgently highlighted by the programme for government briefings that we have received from civil society—those who see, day in, day out, the excruciating impacts of not doing prevention properly; of not breaking those cycles of deprivation and trauma; and of condemning another generation, and another and another, to the waste and misery of poverty, the vastly unequal risks of poor physical and mental health, victimisation, incarceration and early death.

As the Child Poverty Action Group reiterates,

“Prioritising further action to tackle child poverty is a long-term investment, not just for families, but for Scotland’s economic security and the sustainability of public services.”

The Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland shared a striking example of prevention in action—the way in which short breaks for children with disabilities can forestall the need for much more overwhelming, expensive and potentially damaging forms of intervention later in their lives.

“Mend the roof while the sun shines”, folk wisdom tells us. However, if we have not done that—if the sun never quite seemed bright enough, and if there was so much to be done to tidy the

front garden—we need to get out in the rain and do it.

This is not about blame—opportunities have been missed by everyone—but this is, in every sense of the word, a crisis. The Scottish Trades Union Congress general secretary, Roz Foyer, said that the cuts announced this week mean that

“workers and communities across Scotland will be scarred for generations to come.”

Scotland’s children do not need any more scars. They need, as an absolute minimum, the policies that are set out in our Scottish Green amendment: an increased Scottish child payment to the value of at least £40 per week for every eligible child as soon as possible, but definitely by the end of this parliamentary session; support into employment for parents, especially lone parents and those from minoritised communities; a full, independent and then implemented review of childcare in Scotland, so that we can understand exactly what is needed where, as called for by Pregnant Then Screwed and many other organisations; and, of course, the completed roll-out of universal free school meals in primary schools, as had previously been promised.

This is about children’s rights—not just a pious aspiration to ending their poverty but a solemn, serious obligation on the part of the Government to make their lives liveable. Incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was the beginning of that process, but children’s rights do not stand alone. They cannot be fulfilled unless their parents’ and carers’ rights are protected, too. As Engender rightly points out, women’s poverty and children’s poverty are “inextricably linked”. Those include rights to life, to a decent standard of living, to privacy, to health and food, to a clean environment and to protection from discrimination.

We are all vulnerable, although some of us have thicker armour to wear. We all need respect, care, safety and pathways to remedy when those are withheld. That is why UNCRC incorporation should have been followed by a Scottish human rights bill, which was promised for so long and worked for so hard by many people and groups from across Scotland, while the world watched on with hope and encouragement. It is a bitter disappointment that both that bill and the one that would have protected Scotland’s children from pernicious and toxic conversion practices are missing from this week’s programme for government.

Poverty is a breach of human rights, as is so clearly articulated by the Poverty Alliance. We have a moral and ethical obligation to act to protect, support and love those who should expect to inherit the earth. Each and every one of us

needs to work together to fulfil that vision and requirement.

I move amendment S6M-14322.3, to leave out from “; further notes” to “once and for all” and insert:

“, but also notes the Child Poverty Action Group’s finding that Scottish Government policy is not yet adequate to ensure that child poverty targets are met, and that bold, decisive action is required; believes that part of that bold, decisive action must include increasing the Scottish Child Payment to at least £40 a week by the end of the current parliamentary session, providing accessible employability support, especially for lone parents, and establishing an independent review of childcare in Scotland to ensure the provision of what is most needed, as well as robust rent controls to complement affordable housing; notes with deep concern the apparent change in position from the Scottish Government on free school meal provision for all primary school children, with the Programme for Government only committed to expanding free school meals to those in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment in P6 and P7; calls on the Scottish Government to urgently confirm whether it is still its intention to complete the full roll-out that was previously promised; believes that the previously promised Human Rights Bill for Scotland would have provided the framework for improving Scotland’s public services, delivering its minimum core obligations, and thereby eradicating child poverty; expresses its deep dismay that the Human Rights Bill does not appear in the Programme for Government; calls on the Scottish Government to ensure that the burdens of its financial decisions do not fall upon the shoulders of Scotland’s most marginalised people, including families in poverty”.

15:40

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am sure that Maggie Chapman is sincere in what she has just spoken about, but I wish that she had used the influence that she had during her time in government to deliver some of the measures that she has now set out, which were sadly missing from that time.

In St Andrews, which I represent, there is the Old course, where it costs £300 at the height of summer for a round of golf. Less than a mile away is the St Davids centre, which is home to the St Andrews food bank. One would never think that St Andrews would have a food bank, but it has—unfortunately—a thriving food bank. The people who use that food bank come from the town and the wider area. They are good people who want to make a contribution to their society, but they are saddled with physical illness, mental illness, disability and other factors that prevent them from working. We need their talents and skills if we want our economy and our society to flourish. That should be the fundamental basis on which we approach this debate.

The challenge is that we have roughly one in four children in poverty, and the target is to get that figure, within just five years, down to 10 per cent. The challenge is enormous, and, as Paul O’Kane said, we have had some years to try to

address it—if only we had had that focus at an earlier stage. Nevertheless, it is good that the issue is the focus of this debate.

We support the measures on the Scottish child payment in the programme for government. We think that it is a good thing, but it should not be seen as a mark of success that we require such a large child payment for so many people. It should be a sign of a system failure that we require such a large payment for so many people over such a long period of time. Of course we need it, and of course it should be in place, but we should aspire for no one to require that child payment and for no one to require that level of support from the state—that should be our mark of success. I hear ministers say, quite rightly, that they are proud of the child payment, but they should not celebrate the fact that so many people require it. We should regret that fact.

Instead, I would want to focus on helping people to help themselves. I am not proposing to change the policy on the child payment, but we should be putting as much focus on the barriers for the people I know from St Andrews who are desperate to make a contribution to their society.

Two thousand people are waiting over a year to get the mental health treatment that they require. The number of suicides, according to the latest reported figures, was up by 4 per cent. However, the programme for government, in the costed statement that was presented on Tuesday, set out a £19 million cut to mental health support. That does not match up. That does not meet the needs of people who are desperate to get back to work.

Good education, as the education secretary pointed out, is a way of lifting people up. It is a great leveller and gives people from all backgrounds opportunities. I am a big supporter of moving to the vocational side of education—I think that that is very important. Early learning and childcare provision is incredibly important. However, the poverty-related attainment gap has hardly moved at all. We have had this debate before. The education secretary knows that she is not making the progress that she would want to make. The gap is not going to close, or even substantially reduce, by 2026. Yesterday, the First Minister said that he hoped that the gap would be closed a bit every year up to 2026, so that goal has been diluted significantly. At the same time, we have seen real-terms cuts to the pupil equity fund, and two-year-olds are not taking up the early learning and childcare offer that started back in 2012 and 2013. We need to have a real focus on education, as it is a great opportunity to lift people up.

On housing, the fact that 10,000 children live in temporary accommodation should be a cause of shame, because providing good housing is a way

for people to thrive, and people having a good, warm, settled home means that they can contribute to society. However, the numbers of new starts and approvals for new properties are at a 10-year low, and the target for affordable homes is all but gone, according to many interest groups and housing associations. The £196 million cut has dealt a massive blow in that area.

I hope that the cabinet secretary will refer to the whole family wellbeing fund when she sums up, because it is concerning that it is not specified in the programme for government. The fund was not really matching the £500 million spend by 2026—we had a long way to catch up.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Just in case I run out of time in my closing speech, I am happy to commit, once again, to the Scottish Government providing £500 million for the whole family wellbeing fund. Willie Rennie will know the work that we have been doing to invest £110 million in that programme of activity so far. I hope that that gives him some reassurance.

Willie Rennie: It certainly does. It will take some doing to spend the £500 million by 2026, because only, I think, £120 million has been spent so far, but, if the Government is able to implement the policy, it will make a tremendous difference. That is very good and reassuring news.

The two-child cap should, of course, go. I hope that the Labour Government at Westminster gets round to making that happen when the finances are right for it, from its policy perspective. That, for me, is important, because the policy is a symbol of holding back people, including young people, from opportunities in life.

There is so much to do in this session of Parliament and so much for us to get right, whether it is on housing, mental health, education or early years. As there is so much to do in those areas, I hope that the Parliament and all the contributions from SNP back benchers will focus on the challenges that this place has rather than on those that others have, because, that way, we have a chance of reducing child poverty in this country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to the open debate.

15:47

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Any reasonable person would acknowledge the Scottish Government's massive financial investment in tackling child poverty. The SNP programme for government seeks to bolt down a lot of those clear successes and to secure them sustainably for the future, but it also seeks to consider what we can do further.

We know that the annual £450 million for the Scottish child payment has made a real difference. It is part of the investment that has prevented 100,000 children from falling into poverty and it has, importantly—it often goes unsaid—made a huge qualitative difference to the lives of not just those 100,000 children but to the lives of all 329,000 children who receive the Scottish child payment.

Particular mention should be made of the range of best start grant and best start foods payments, which are a real focused investment that is sometimes forgotten about. We must look at what more we can do in that area.

The Scottish Government's action has removed the blight of poverty for many people, and it has ensured essential cash support for many other families, given the woefully inadequate social protections of the previous UK Government, which now—genuinely disappointingly—appear to be those of the current UK Labour Government.

We know that child poverty is lower in Scotland than it is in any other part of the UK, including in Wales, where Labour has been in control since the inception of devolution there. Current statistics suggest that child poverty is 6 per cent lower in Scotland than it is in the UK—it is, of course, still far too high—and modelling work shows that relative child poverty in Scotland could be as much as 11 percentage points lower than it is in the UK. The figure is, again, still too high, but we must be doing something right in Scotland and we should not throw the baby out with the bath water—as, I think, Mr O'Kane was doing with his comment about the Scottish child payment not having been that effective. I hope that Labour remains committed to the Scottish child payment: I am worried by some of Mr O'Kane's comments.

Paul O'Kane: I do not think that Bob Doris can characterise my comments as saying that the Scottish child payment was ineffective. Mr Doris has heard me in the chamber, as has the cabinet secretary, being supportive of the Scottish child payment. Indeed, the Labour Party supported its inception and the work that we continue to do. The point that I am making is that the Government has to be very careful about the data and the model that it uses to analyse and report the general impacts to the Parliament.

Bob Doris: Mr O'Kane's previous comments are on the record. He just said that he believes that the Scottish child payment has been effective. I will return to that later.

It is wholly disheartening to see the Labour amendment trying to apportion blame to the Scottish Government for child poverty challenges in Scotland. Yes—we have a responsibility, but apportioning entirely to us blame for child poverty

in Scotland misses the bigger picture. Now that Labour is the UK Government, that is deeply worrying, because it ignores 14 years of UK Westminster austerity, which has targeted our most vulnerable people. As the First Minister has stated, Scotland has been swimming against the tide to tackle child poverty because of detrimental actions that have been taken by successive UK Governments. Labour ignores the divergence between child poverty in Scotland and that in the rest of the UK. Quite frankly, Scotland has done far better, often with cross-party support, and we must do much more.

A key part of the motion is where it talks about “working constructively with the UK Government”.

That is why I was disappointed to hear Labour members in the debate not necessarily embracing the positive impact of the Scottish child payment. If MPs and MSPs in Scotland, on a cross-party basis, believe that the Scottish child payment has been effective, let us join together in solidarity and campaign for a child payment for England and Wales. Mr O'Kane believes that the payment has been effective in Scotland. Why not have the same for England and Wales? At a stroke, it would release £450 million more spending every single year in Scotland for some of the stuff that Mr Rennie and others want. I hope that we can get that cross-party consensus in Scotland, because it would be really powerful.

Perhaps we can get cross-party consensus on something else, which is the axing of the bedroom tax. Let us remember that it was first introduced by the Labour Party for the private rented sector. It has been mitigated by the Scottish National Party to the tune of £618 million since 2013, and has benefited 92,000 households—£76 million has been spent this year alone—to ensure that people on the lowest incomes have enough money to pay their rent. That does not happen elsewhere in the UK. Let us have cross-party solidarity on that—bringing that money home to Scotland and helping people elsewhere in the UK.

Miles Briggs: Bob Doris talks about cross-party solidarity. Will he, today, join in solidarity with those who want all primary 6 and 7 pupils to have free school meals?

Bob Doris: I think that Mr Briggs is a bit behind the times. When I joined Parliament in 2007, there were no universal free school meals in Scotland. I campaigned for free school meals until the end of secondary 2. Provision up to P5 is universal, and we are making progress on P6 and P7. It is disappointing that, due to UK austerity, we cannot go further. I am on record saying that I want universal free school meals in secondary 1 and S2. I do not know what I would be signing up to,

but I think that I would go further than doing what Miles Briggs is calling for.

Finally, let me talk a bit about the cliff edge that is created by universal credit and its interaction with the Scottish child payment. Any review of universal credit by the UK Labour Government should consider whether it can support continuation of the Scottish child payment once universal credit is withdrawn, because that is a real cliff edge in terms of benefit loss to people who are in work. That would benefit the kind of people whom Mr Rennie talked about, such as those in part-time work who are trying to get into full-time work but risk losing the Scottish child payment. That is a big financial risk for them. Let us make sure that the two systems—the UK system of universal credit and the Scottish child payment system—talk to each other, and that the systems dovetail, so that we can work for everyone who is living in poverty, not just to lift them out of poverty but sustain them into meaningful and well-paid work.

15:53

Annie Wells (Glasgow) (Con): We have heard today and, indeed, over a number of years, who the Scottish National Party thinks is to blame for child poverty. No doubt we will, no matter the outcome of this debate, hear it many more times. However, seeing as we are standing here in Edinburgh, in the Scottish Parliament, where the SNP has been in power for more than 17 years, let us start at home.

We have heard the Scottish Government talk about its commitment to eradicating child poverty. That pledge has been made in speeches, press releases, statements, manifestos and, most recently, in the programme for government. However, since the SNP came to power in 2007, the level of child poverty in Scotland has remained the same.

Despite the SNP having full control over health, education and many other key devolved portfolio areas, nothing has changed. Perhaps some of that failure can be attributed to another SNP pledge that came to nothing—the pledge to reduce Scotland's poverty-related attainment gap. Perhaps if ministers had succeeded in closing that educational gulf, they would not now need to spend so much time talking about child poverty. Perhaps if their actions even occasionally matched their warm words, tens of thousands of young lives would have been enhanced. Instead, we are back to square 1.

As an MSP for the Glasgow region, I see the effects of child poverty as clearly as anyone. The ripples go through society and the economy. They can drag down schools, community centres and

local facilities and worsen the mood of just about everyone.

Key infrastructure, including schools, is important. One way or another, most MSPs believe that education is the best way to deliver opportunity and that it is a way out of poverty. All kids deserve to go to school, where they will be cared for, educated well and nurtured. It should be that way from the moment they step inside the school gates for the first time, as so many young ones across the country have done in the past few weeks.

One immediate commitment that the Government could make is to properly rolling out free lunches for every pupil in primary school, but, as we have heard today, that will not be happening. That would ensure that, at the very least, those children were not being expected to learn on an empty stomach, and it would take some pressure off the household budget for many hard-pressed families.

There is more that can be done. Violence in schools has become a problem in recent years, with a number of news reports showing increases in the number of pupils, as well as teachers, being attacked. The very fact that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills made a statement on the matter earlier in the week proves that there must be a growing problem. We cannot have young people being too scared to attend class and teachers too frightened and downtrodden to work. We need to give schools the powers and resources to properly crack down on bad behaviour, which can ruin the experience for a whole class and drive down the overall performance of a school.

However, it is the failure to close the poverty-related attainment gap that causes the most long-term damage. Despite it famously being the former First Minister's top priority, in the years since, it has been downgraded to something that one minister described as

"exceptionally difficult, if not impossible".—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 18 January 2023; c 24.]

That dearth of ambition was played out in the recent figures that show that the gap has widened in the past year from 16 to 17.2 percentage points. That represents thousands and thousands of children whose futures are determined by where they grow up.

The conditions are not much better for their parents. The situation around childcare is a mess and is making life more difficult for parents—and, let us face it, childcare is almost always on women. In order to get back to work and to get the family bank balance up again, they need proper childcare. However, research in Scotland has

repeatedly shown that parents are not getting the childcare that they want or need. Despite an expansion of free childcare provision, the system remains “fragile”, according to Scotland’s own public services watchdog.

It will be harder to change the short, medium and long-term prospects of any family if the children are not getting on as they should in school and the parents do not have the flexibility that they need in order to work. It is within the gift of the Scottish Government to find a way to solve those problems.

Research has shown time and again that the people of Scotland want the Scottish and UK Governments to work more closely together. They want that to be the case across all areas and at all times. However, never has the case for joint working and collaborative effort been more essential than it is for enhancing the prospects of the next generation. That cannot be done unless real changes are made and the dial on child poverty is shifted once and for all. My party agrees with John Swinney that that is one of the single most important objectives. It is time for both Governments to show that they really mean it.

15:59

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I am really grateful to stand here today to speak about one of the most pressing issues that we face in Scotland, which is child poverty. It is a call to create a society where every child, no matter their life circumstances, can realise their full potential and where every child has a full tummy, a home fit for purpose and clothing that they feel comfortable and happy in.

Writing this speech gave me cause to reflect on moments of my own life, as I am sure that we all do when pondering issues for debate. I remember back to a time in my life when I was scared for the future of my children, when I became a newly single mother. My circumstances changed unexpectedly, and the challenges that lay ahead felt overwhelming, but because of the safety net of our welfare system, my children and I were able to remain stable. I did not have to move them from their home, their schools or their friends, and I could focus on ensuring that they had food, shelter and, most importantly, security. That support was crucial to our wellbeing. Today, five of my children are in further education and I am here in this Parliament, serving my community. Without that safety net, my story might have been very different. That is the reality for many families.

Poverty is not just a statistic; it is a barrier that can prevent children from achieving their dreams and from fulfilling their potential. When we talk about realising potential, we are talking about

more than just individual success. The realisation of potential is good for the child and their family, but it goes further than that: it is good for our communities, it is good for our economy and, ultimately, it is good for our country. When children grow up with opportunities, they become adults who contribute to society in meaningful ways. A society where potential is fulfilled is a society that thrives. I am grateful that my country invested in me and my children, so that we can now pay that back.

However, potential can be realised only when the roadblocks are removed. The barriers that poverty creates, be they financial, social or educational, are often dictated by the circumstances that a child is born into. It is our responsibility to remove those barriers and ensure that every child has the chance to succeed, no matter their background.

What I have come to realise, through my personal experience and my work here in the Parliament, is how often we overlook welfare as an investment. Welfare is not a burden on society—it is a crucial investment in the health, happiness and productivity of our people. By ensuring that people have the support that they need, we are laying the groundwork for a thriving economy and a stronger, more cohesive society.

Welfare goes further than simply preventing immediate hardship. Through the provision of welfare, we are setting the stage for long-term success. Children who grow up with food security, stable housing and access to education are more likely to become healthy, productive adults who can contribute positively. The contrary causes pressure on public services and feeds the criminal justice system.

As I thought about the Scottish Government’s commitment to tackling child poverty, I pictured two possible futures for a child—one with support and one without it. Let us take a child named Scott, who was born into financial hardship. Their future could follow two very different paths.

In one scenario, Scott’s parents receive a baby box that is filled with essentials for those early months and they get the Scottish child payment. That small financial lifeline helps them to keep the heating on, to put healthy meals on the table and maybe even to enjoy a family day out. Scott goes to a nursery where they receive free, quality education, giving them the best start in life. The parents, relieved of childcare costs, can balance work and home life, and they slowly build a stable future.

In another scenario, there is no baby box and no child payment. The family struggles to afford the basics and the stress spills over into Scott’s life. With no free childcare, the parents face an

impossible choice: stay at home to care for Scott or take on extra work, leaving Scot without that crucial early education. The family remains stuck in survival mode and Scott struggles to get ahead of their peers.

Free school meals and affordable housing are more than just policies. They make the difference between children like Scott having the chance to thrive and their being held back by circumstances beyond their control. The provision of such measures is not just support; it is an investment in our children, our communities, our NHS and our country's future. When we break down the barriers of poverty, every child can have a myriad of opportunities opened to them.

As much as we seek to strive to tackle child poverty here in Scotland, we are confined by devolution. Without the full powers of independence, we are reliant on the UK Government exercising those powers that we do not hold. The UK Government's policies include the two-child limit on benefits, the cap on universal credit and a welfare system that fails to guarantee even the most basic essentials. The UK Government could choose to remove those poverty-causing barriers and lift an additional 40,000 children in Scotland out of poverty.

At a time when Tory and now Labour austerity continues putting pressure on public finances, we must all call on the UK Government to follow in the footsteps of the Scottish Government and prioritise the eradication of child poverty. We must never forget that investing in our children's future is not a cost—it is a benefit.

16:05

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I begin by thanking Karen Adam for her very affecting and at times moving account of her own experience some years ago of the real benefits of the welfare state. It is not often that we hear how enabling and empowering the benefits system can be; when we talk about those realities, we often hear negative language about people's experience of that system.

I do not agree that this Parliament is confined by devolution. In fact, I think that we are empowered by it. Many things have been described already today and I am sure that we will hear about more. This Parliament, and the Government that serves it, can do so much more, because it benefits from additional funding of £2,417 per head of population. We can decide how we want to spend that extra money, and we rightly do so on the Scottish child payment. Paul O'Kane clearly set out our support for that and for the difference that it makes to families across Scotland.

I welcome today's debate on something that we were told by the First Minister is a key priority in the programme for government. When he spoke about that programme yesterday, we heard little about new ways but heard of significant reduction in means. As my colleagues have said, he is now the third First Minister to make a priority of reducing child poverty, but there has been little progress in doing so. In fact, 30,000 more children are living in poverty in Scotland than when the SNP Government came to power.

Child poverty has grown since Labour left Government in the UK, as a direct result of decisions made by the Conservative Government, both because of the choices that it made regarding funding and significant reductions in the welfare state and the benefits that are paid to people but, crucially, because of the kind of economy that that Conservative Government thought we should have—a low-wage, low-skill, low-growth economy where inequality grows within and between communities. We know that, by the end of the Parliament that just finished, and for the first time in history, families were poorer than they had been at the outset. That is a clear indication of the lost economic growth that would have made a difference to people's incomes and bank balances.

Eight weeks into the new Government, I believe that there has been a significant departure. All Governments should be judged in the long term and by what they manage to do and achieve over many years. The SNP has had an unprecedented term in government here in Scotland. We know that no Government gets everything right and that the Labour Government will not get everything right, just as this SNP Government certainly has not, but we should be judged in the long term.

The early signs are positive. The first action that we took was to instruct the Low Pay Commission to establish a living wage. Many people who are in poverty are in work, and that scandal of low pay will be addressed through a new deal for working people and enhanced rights, which will make a significant difference. Those rights reflect some of the key problems for people accessing work and will include giving rights on day 1 and removing the problem of zero-hours contracts.

We must also address the economy as it is, rather than as we would have it be. We know that Scotland has a commitment to 1,140 hours of free childcare, but we must ensure that there is increased flexibility within that. Some of what the cabinet secretary set out in her opening remarks was about flexibility, looking at what has been done for a small cohort of people in Dundee. We would like to see the evidence about how that can make a difference. I commend to her the work of Flexible Childcare Services Scotland, which also operates in Dundee and has put provision in place

so that people who are offered an extra shift at work—sometimes with no notice at all—have the option to send their child to that care so that they can realise that shift and put some extra money in their bank account, making a massive difference.

We must also ensure that there is access to proper work. The Finance and Public Administration Committee visited the University of Dundee last week. I was happy to have the committee in my home city and asked university senior management how we can ensure careers and opportunities, not only for new Dundonians from our international community but for people who have been in Dundee for many years, because we have a significant problem with people being out of the labour market. The senior management was clear that the funded pathway into employment in those kinds of jobs has been narrowed and narrowed. The upskilling fund and graduate apprenticeships have been dropped under the provisions that have been made by the Government. Those are the routes out of poverty and in-work poverty for many people.

We should be clear that—contrary to what are, frankly, the statistical contortions of the First Minister over the past 24 hours—the attainment gap is growing in Scotland. That is absolutely clear. I use the example of Dundee again. The previous Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills made cuts to attainment funding for the poorest communities in Dundee. That money was spread more widely across the country, but there was a significant cut to the money that was available to the poorest communities in Scotland.

Today, we also see the cuts to the free school meals promise. Let us be in no doubt that that is a result of the Scottish Government's budget and its mishandling of the finances. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Fraser of Allander Institute, Audit Scotland and the Scottish Fiscal Commission say that that choice is a result of its mistakes. John Swinney is the third First Minister to set the destination but, as in so many ways across the many top priorities, this is a Government that has lost its way.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Marie McNair is joining us remotely.

16:10

Marie McNair (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): I am pleased to speak in this debate on the programme for government and the Scottish Government's commitment to eradicating child poverty. It is essential that that is the single most important objective of the Scottish Government. The First Minister is right to say that the material wealth of a child's family should not hold them back in a modern and prosperous Scotland, so I

welcome the intended approach that he set out yesterday and that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills has set out today.

I take this opportunity to put on the record my thanks to all the volunteers, charities and advice agencies in my constituency, who are on the front line. They are there, and they are always there, providing support to so many in poverty.

Despite the harsh Westminster welfare regime, the actions of the Scottish Government are making a difference in tackling child poverty. As a member of the Social Justice and Social Security Committee, I regularly hear from charities, academics and those with lived experience about the positive impact of the Scottish child payment. The Poverty Alliance stated that the Scottish child payment

"is having a demonstrably positive impact at an individual household and family level, with Social Security Scotland processes having made applying for this support both less stigmatising and rooted in human rights."

The Poverty and Inequality Commission said:

"The Scottish Child Payment is undoubtedly a game changer".

It also said that the importance to reducing child poverty of

"delivering the Scottish Child Payment and getting cash directly to families cannot be overstated".

The commission's view has consistently been that the Scottish child payment is the main contributor to progress in reducing child poverty at the national level.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation gathered evidence in a 4,000-person survey and it found that two people in three felt more financially secure once they received the Scottish child payment. It is a hugely significant policy and one that is doing a lot of heavy lifting.

Importantly, however, a lot of experts note that, despite the improvements from the Scottish Government in tackling child poverty, without significant action from the UK Government, we will continue to see children stuck in poverty. That has been made clear by the academic Juliet Stone, who stated:

"The Scottish Child Payment ... is for many families simply acting to offset the consequences of UK-level policies that restrict their incomes—most importantly, the two-child limit and the benefit cap. Fully addressing child poverty in Scotland therefore requires action at a UK level as well as at a national level."

That really is the elephant in the room. Instead of waiting for the predictable heckling, jeering and relishing of a possible attack on the SNP if targets are not met, I remind all colleagues across the chamber that the targets for reducing child poverty are not the SNP's alone but targets that were set

by our Parliament. They belong to us all. They require us to genuinely contribute to finding solutions and they require both Governments to work together.

Labour MSPs can feel no joy that Tory welfare policy is continuing. Labour's two-child policy and its abhorrent rape clause are denying children what they need to thrive. Labour MSPs dutifully campaigned for those who were elected and followed the herd, so they should at least have the decency to tell children why they are being denied basic levels of subsistence. How can they say they are serious about eradicating child poverty when they failed at the first hurdle?

The Scottish Government will not shy away from admitting that more can be done. However, without significant action from the UK Government to tackle poverty, our efforts will always be hindered. In ignoring the evidence that is readily available, Labour is failing the first big test of government by ignoring the national scandal of child poverty. That was clear in July, when it suspended the seven Labour MPs who voted to scrap the two-child cap—perhaps the only true socialist parliamentarians left in the party, and they have now been removed.

According to the Child Poverty Action Group, one in nine children are affected by the two-child limit, which is more than 1.6 million children. That policy is actively causing deprivation, and every year it pushes more children into poverty. Labour is making the political choice to keep children in poverty while lifting the cap on bankers' bonuses—that is the harsh reality of this matter. Prioritising eradicating child poverty means doing the right thing and scrapping the two-child policy and the benefit cap.

We also need to see an essentials guarantee in universal credit. The Trussell Trust points out that almost half of people claiming universal credit ran out of food in the past month and did not have enough money to buy more. It is clear that universal credit is falling short and is pushing people into food banks.

While the UK Labour Party continues to leave children in poverty and its members argue among themselves, the Scottish Government will get on with protecting children in poverty. We will continue to lead the way in tackling child poverty because, for us, this is not just a policy goal; it is a moral imperative and one that we will remain dedicated to achieving.

Let us push forward on the issue and continue to prioritise eradicating child poverty.

16:16

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I am perhaps less generous than some colleagues and less optimistic than Willie Rennie. I find myself arriving here today and wondering what the point of this debate is. I do not think that it is real. I am not sure what has depressed me most: the suggestion that we are confined by devolution or watching the glee and joy with which many SNP MSPs have pivoted their attacks from the Conservatives to Labour. It seems that some of these things are more about politics than about moral duty.

Only the Scottish Government, led by this First Minister, could have the brass neck to come here and try to hide behind the most disadvantaged in our society in order to detract from its disastrous tenure.

The First Minister talked of the past 25 years, but he is looking back through rose-tinted spectacles, because the truth is that the Scotland that we see today does not live up to the early promise of this Parliament. The blame lies squarely with the SNP, which, over the past 17 years, has squandered the opportunity to build a better Scotland. The truth is that, for many young people, Scotland is a grim place in which to grow up, and the ministers sitting on the SNP front benches have overseen every minute of that situation for the past 17 years.

We all know that, much like the promises to close the poverty-related attainment gap and to make education the number 1 priority, the Scottish Government's latest bold ambition will remain just that and is not worth the paper that it is written on. There is little hope, only the same false promises and failed solutions from the same people who keep getting it so badly wrong.

It is true to say that the Scottish Government has shifted the dial, but only in a negative direction. Our once-proud education system is a shadow of its former self, our national health service is crumbling and shrinking inwards towards urban centres, and the promise of a good job and a fair crack at the whip is out of reach for many. Of course, it is always easier to blame someone else—or, in the SNP's case, everyone else—but that does a disservice to this generation and to future generations.

We hear that budgets are tight, but bad decisions have been made year after year, the wrong priorities have been pursued for the wrong reasons and there has been no strategic oversight or vision. We see that again now. How can the Scottish Government announce that it wants to eradicate child poverty at the same time as rowing back on the commitment to deliver free school meals? How could the First Minister stand up

yesterday, and again at First Minister's questions today, and talk about having the right support available, through pregnancy to birth, when, in the Scotland that he leads—Scotland in 2024—some health boards do not offer in-person antenatal classes? Some of them do not even offer them online.

We live in a country where our Government can no longer get the basics right. It has lost its grip on health boards and on many of the other quangos and organisations that it is responsible for—and that is before we even consider whether the First Minister's own drive to address child poverty is really credible. This, lest we forget, is an experienced and skilled politician who has served as Scotland's finance secretary and as its education secretary, all the while brushing away serious challenges in the system and throwing around political insults and soundbites. I know that there has been a transformation and a whole new approach since the First Minister got the top job, but I, for one, do not believe it. The problem is that many of the challenges that we have go beyond simply money, and they stretch over so many budget years that it is laughable to suggest that changes could not have been made if the will had been there. As I say, some of the challenges do not come down to money; they are about questions of leadership.

There has been a litany of failed promises, including on tackling the cost of the school day—we heard about that again at the start of the debate—but very little has been done on it. Branded uniforms are still commonplace in most schools. There are lots of hidden costs in the school day, such as milk. There are no breakfast clubs in many parts of the country, and there is no after-school provision in most parts of the country. There are challenges for people in accessing childcare. Yes, it is good that we have 1,140 hours of funded childcare, but if the provision is not there or is not flexible enough to allow families to go to work, words in the chamber mean nothing.

We have heard from Government members, as always, about the good bits of policy, but they need to have the moral courage to admit that it is patchwork at best and that many of the measures that have been set out are sticking plasters that offer no bold or radical solutions. If that was just a one-off, we could perhaps agree that it is down to budget pressures, but we all know that the lack of vision goes far beyond that. Most families in Scotland know that, when things are tight, people focus on what really matters.

Even as the SNP Government announces a laser-like focus on eradicating child poverty—as it has done I do not know how many times—its decisions show that its focus remains all over the place. In short, this year's programme for

government amounts to nothing more than a mirage of activity in what has been a 17-year-long desert of SNP neglect. It is just a shame that the people of Scotland will have to wait another 20 months before they get the chance to call time on this waste-of-time approach.

16:22

Collette Stevenson (East Kilbride) (SNP): Eradicating child poverty is the single greatest priority for the SNP Scottish Government. No one's opportunities should be dictated by the circumstances that they are born into, and supporting every child in Scotland is the greatest investment that we can make in our future. Of course, poverty is a multi-faceted issue that requires a range of interventions, and I will touch on some key matters this afternoon.

Social security is one of those areas, and a key part of the Scottish Government's work to tackle child poverty was the introduction of the Scottish child payment. Charities called the policy a "game changer", and many academics have spoken of its significance. Professor Danny Dorling, for example, has talked about the impact of the payment through changing the inequality level in Scotland. He suggested that the Scottish child payment has perhaps caused

"the largest fall in child poverty anywhere in Europe"

since the fall of the Berlin wall.

Professor Ruth Patrick told the Social Justice and Social Security Committee that the payment is

"a really well-targeted policy"

that corrects the UK Government's

"divorcing of the relationship between need and entitlement."—[*Official Report, Social Justice and Social Security Committee*, 23 May 2024; c 13.]

The Scottish child payment is worth £26.70 per eligible child per week and puts money into the pockets of hard-pressed parents. The latest data shows that more than 4,400 children in East Kilbride receive the Scottish child payment, so low-income families there are benefiting directly from more than £500,000 through the payment every month.

Of course, policies such as the Scottish child payment do not exist in a vacuum. Right now, the SNP Government is mitigating the worst of the policies that the Tories introduced, such as the bedroom tax and the benefit cap. The mitigation of Westminster welfare policies has cost the SNP Government around £1.2 billion since 2010. I hope that the Labour Government in Westminster will take time to reflect on its plans, because, by keeping Tory fiscal rules, Labour will force more austerity on the people of Scotland.

In the face of Labour cuts at Westminster, Scotland's Government must work harder and smarter to deliver for Scotland, using the limited resources that are available. The programme for government sets out some of the ways in which we can do that, particularly on child poverty.

As the First Minister outlined, eradicating child poverty and boosting economic growth go hand in hand. It is estimated that child poverty cost the Scottish economy more than £3 billion in 2023 as a result of lower productivity and the investment that is required to mitigate poverty's harmful effects. The First Minister's vision to grow Scotland's economy and create jobs will, in turn, support investment in Scotland's vital public services and ambitious anti-poverty measures. That ties in with the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's work on parental employment.

Another important policy area is housing. We know that there are challenges on that, particularly with house building, in the current economic climate and, of course, given Westminster's £1.3 billion cut to Scotland's capital budget. However, the SNP in government continues to deliver more affordable housing per person than the Governments in England and Wales. We have already delivered more than 130,000 affordable homes. As the programme for government outlined, another £600 million will be invested this year to continue that work.

Miles Briggs: Will the member take an intervention?

Collette Stevenson: I am sorry, but I will just move on.

With that investment in affordable housing, the SNP Government is keeping rents lower, which is benefiting around 140,000 children in poverty each year. Opposition members might not want to hear this, but Chris Birt told the Social Justice and Social Security Committee about research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that found that the Scottish Government's investment in social housing has made a significant difference in keeping poverty levels lower here than they are elsewhere in the UK.

The SNP Government is delivering for the people of Scotland. We have built a new social security system with dignity, fairness and respect at its heart. We have rolled out seven benefits that are unique to Scotland, including the game-changing Scottish child payment. We have increased funded early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours per year, and we have delivered free bus travel for everyone under 22. Taken together, the SNP Government's policies are estimated to be keeping 100,000 children out of poverty this

year. We are doing that with the limited powers of devolution.

The new UK Labour Government must take inspiration from what the SNP has achieved. It should introduce an equivalent of the Scottish child payment in the rest of the UK, and it must get rid of Tory welfare reforms such as the two-child benefit cap and the bedroom tax. That would let the Scottish Government invest more in its anti-poverty measures. If the Labour Government does not do that, more and more people will see that the only way for Scotland to get change is to become an independent country.

The Deputy Presiding Officer: We move to closing speeches. I am disappointed to note that two members who participated in the debate are not here. That is disrespectful to every other member who participated and it is disrespectful to the chair. Perhaps my comments could be passed on to them by their colleagues.

16:30

Maggie Chapman: In the debate and in the many briefings that were circulated before it, we have heard and have had shared with us many examples of the Christie commission's findings of the generational effects of social and economic inequalities and of the imperative—which is more urgent than ever—to prioritise prevention. The prevention of poverty, and thereby the prevention of pain, ill health, physical and psychological scars, and so much more, must motivate us all. We have also heard that the sticking plasters, such as food banks, are battling under burgeoning demand.

Poverty is a political choice—yes, we are responsible for the choices that we make. I am sure that Willie Rennie will embrace as his own all the decisions that were made when his party was instigating and perpetuating austerity as part of the UK Government for those fateful five years. There are consequences to the decisions that we take as politicians. I am proud, for example, that it was the Scottish Greens' influence two and a half years ago that led to the mitigation of the UK Government's benefit cap being written into the tackling child poverty action plan. Was it enough? No, clearly not—it was not nearly enough. That is why we need to heed the calls for action on the fundamentals of poverty prevention.

The Child Poverty Action Group's briefing for the debate clearly identifies the areas that must be our focus, including social security, employment and childcare, the cost of the school day, tax, and housing. Alongside the urgently-needed increase to the Scottish child payment, we must plug the gaps in Scotland's social security system, and we must remember that the right to decent living

standards is not restricted according to nationality or immigration status. Close the Gap reinforces CPAG's call for employment support, especially for parents who are experiencing intersectional barriers to well-paid, secure, flexible work and childcare that is free, accessible and flexible. Several members have talked about that in the debate.

I, like others this afternoon, celebrate the social security system that we have in Scotland. Social security is not a burden. It is not something that we should be ashamed of, but a mark of a decent, compassionate and humane society that values collective care and responsibility for each other, not the individualised alienation that has been the consequence of too many years of Tory rule in Westminster. We have already heard much in the chamber about the need for sufficient support for the costs of the school day, particularly school meals. Universalism matters: it destigmatises, it equalises and it endows recipients with equal respect and worth. Undoubtedly, there is more that we can do to reduce the cost of the school day, which includes uniforms, trips and activities and digital devices, which are no luxury, but an essential tool for learning.

Others, including Collette Stevenson and Miles Briggs, have spoken of the importance of decent, secure homes for all children. We need to see action on the affordable housing supply programme. As Shelter and Crisis have shown us, ending child poverty is impossible without ending the housing emergency, with almost 10,000 children in temporary accommodation. That is up 138 per cent since 2014, and another 45 children become homeless every day. I urge colleagues on the Labour benches to press their Prime Minister to end the two-child limit, and not to wait for a wholesale review of benefits. We know that it is wrong now, and it needs to go now.

We are living through a transition, whether we want to or not. The climate and nature emergencies cannot step aside and wait while a couple of Governments argue over who is most to blame. The question is whether that transition will be one of justice or of oppression. Cutting budgets for walking, wheeling and cycling and bringing back peak rail fares—none of that will grow a world in which today's children can breathe and thrive, or in which today's parents can model the behaviour that we will all depend on.

Our decisions matter. I would much rather see money that currently subsidises private companies or invests in unproven, unreliable or expensive technologies that will not help us to address any of the emergencies that we currently face going to vital services that our children and their families need. I therefore urge the Government to think again about these short-sighted cuts—about the

losses to the budget for children's rights, protection and justice, and its shamefully diluted position on free school meals. I ask the Government to imagine the position of carers, especially single parents, who are kept in poverty solely by the randomness of childcare provision.

I implore the Government to think again about dropping its commitment to a human rights bill and a ban on conversion practices—commitments that it once made to the most marginalised, excluded and silenced of our neighbours. The human rights legislation in particular could be an important tool to tackle child poverty. It could provide the framework for focusing public expenditure and improving our public services, helping us to deliver our minimum core obligations. We will not—indeed, we cannot—achieve the laudable mission of eradicating child poverty without meeting those core obligations.

There are stark choices to be made by a Government that is facing tough financial decisions. It is up to us to ensure that the consequences and burdens of those decisions—those financial choices—that we make do not fall on the shoulders of Scotland's most marginalised people: our children.

16:36

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I am pleased to close the debate on one of the most important issues facing Scotland today. Growing up in poverty impacts on life chances, sees pupils denied their potential and life goals, and stifles opportunity and life goals, as many members, including Miles Briggs, Karen Adam, the cabinet secretary, Maggie Chapman and others have spoken about today.

The truth is, however, that in Scotland, after years of SNP and Tory waste and mismanagement on finances, inequality and poverty have soared. There are 40,000 more children in poverty in Scotland today than there were a decade ago. Both Governments have let Scotland's young people down.

I suspect that that is why the SNP is lining up with the Tories today to attack Labour and our plans to deliver stronger workers' rights and wages—because it cannot stand on its own record. Unlike the Tories and the SNP, however—

Bob Doris: Will the member give way?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will, in two seconds.

Unlike the records of the Tories and the SNP, the record of the previous Labour Government is different. In Government, we lifted 1 million children out of poverty. Theirs is the failure that Marie McNair and others have set out—ours is a record that I am proud of.

Bob Doris: I am confused by Ms Duncan-Glancy's logic. Can she explain why child poverty levels are far higher in Wales under Labour than they are in Scotland under the SNP?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I gently suggest to the member that he might want to look at his own Government's record on child poverty before he starts pointing fingers at others.

The eradication—[*Interruption.*] The eradication of child poverty must be a national mission for the Scottish Government, as colleagues including Paul O'Kane, Willie Rennie and Annie Wells have argued, as it is for the new UK Labour Government.

The members on the Government benches in this Parliament say that it is their priority. In fact, as my colleague Michael Marra pointed out, three First Ministers have said that it is their priority, but their actions do not back up their words. John Swinney, Humza Yousaf and Nicola Sturgeon have all broken promises to the young people of Scotland. They slashed the affordable housing budget, as my colleague Miles Briggs highlighted; froze the Scottish welfare fund; abandoned parental employability schemes; cut teacher numbers and the MCR pathways programme; and cut the employability budget by £21 million and parental employability funds by £20 million. Yesterday, they abandoned their pledge on free school meals and revised down their ambitions to close the attainment gap.

It could not be clearer that this Government has no plan, no strategy and now, it seems, no ambition on child poverty. Broken promises and low ambitions will not be forgotten by Scotland's young people, and it is not just the stuff that their Government has failed to do that is the issue; it is the Government's constant dogged head-in-the-sand approach that it is right in what it is doing. It was the Government's own Poverty and Inequality Commission that said:

"The ... next progress report cannot just point to actions already taken nor propose more small-scale tests of change. The Scottish Government needs to restore faith and renew optimism".

The Government can list policies that it thinks contribute to reducing poverty all that it wants, and the finance secretary can pretend on the radio that more of the same will work, but organisations can see through that, and 260,000 children in Scotland can talk about the reality.

Although the Poverty and Inequality Commission recognised the impact of the Scottish child payment, as does Scottish Labour, it said—[*Interruption.*]—and SNP members might want to listen to this:

"Progress in other areas is slow or not evident at all."

All that can change. As many of us know, poverty is not inevitable. Change is possible. Within just eight weeks, the new UK Labour Administration has already acted. We will tackle child poverty at its roots with a new deal for working people to deliver a real living wage, while reviewing universal credit so that it makes work pay and tackles poverty. We will deliver a genuine pay rise for more than 200,000 of the lowest-paid Scots. We will tackle the cost of living crisis by establishing GB Energy, a publicly owned energy company that will drive down energy bills. We will deliver affordable public transport and housing support. [*Interruption.*] Any problem that gets—

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): Ms Duncan-Glancy, I am very keen to hear you, but I am aware of conversations happening across the chamber. I ask members to focus on Ms Duncan-Glancy's words.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: We will deliver affordable public transport and housing support, end problem debt and provide help and support for families and households across Scotland. That is the difference that a progressive Government can make, and that is what we will strive to deliver every day. By doing the work that this Scottish National Party Government is failing to do, we will spread opportunity for all.

16:41

Roz McCall (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am delighted to close the debate on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives. I welcome the contributions that have been made by members from across the floor. There is cross-party support for the objectives that we are discussing today, and members fully agree that there should be a full and fervent focus on eradicating child poverty.

I note the terms of the Government's motion, but I will speak to the Scottish Conservative amendment, because the various statistics in there paint a concerning picture of the lack of tangible movement rather than the allocation of funding. We cannot fully accept that the Scottish child payment is a panacea when 26 per cent of children live in poverty, which is a number that has barely changed in 17 years; when 10,000 children live in temporary accommodation, which is an astounding 138 per cent increase in a decade; and when the health of children is adversely affected by poverty, with the number of paediatric waits having increased by a staggering 114.6 per cent. All that falls under the Scottish National Party Government's mismanagement. However, before I get into my particular comments—

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I hear what you say about the Scottish Government taking responsibility for the 24 per

cent of children who are in poverty in Scotland. Who should take responsibility for the 30 per cent of children in England who are in poverty, or the 29 per cent of children who are in poverty in Wales?

The Presiding Officer: Always through the chair, please.

Roz McCall: I am going to stick to my lines, because we are in Scotland and it is to Scotland that we will look.

I will go on to make my comments but, before I do, I will respond to some of the contributions made by other members. In her opening remarks, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills mentioned the 1,140 hours of free childcare. We all welcome those. I was a councillor in Perth and Kinross when we were putting those processes through. At every single stage, we said that everything needed to be totally funded and that there should be a completely blended offer involving the private, voluntary and independent sector and childminders. Unfortunately, although the provision has come in, it is not meeting those aims. I accept the cabinet secretary's words, but the system is not working for everybody.

Miles Briggs talked about having a holistic approach to health and housing, which is important. I support his request for a bespoke child health and welfare strategy. I also note his comments on the worrying diminishing number of housing completions, which are at a record low, and the reduced pipeline of new social housing, which is concerning. However, I do not think that those have anything to do with the capital budget reductions.

I welcome the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice's intervention on Mr Briggs's point about bringing council properties back into use, which highlighted the Government's plans with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I look forward to hearing more detail on that work when it comes through.

As usual, Willie Rennie made an excellent contribution. Like him, I regret that we happen to be in the position of needing a child payment, and I agree with him that we need to find ways of helping people to help themselves. I also note the member's comments on the whole family wellbeing fund, which the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice did respond to. I appreciate that, because a freedom of information request says that a lot of initial payments have gone on council funding for staff. As we move forward, I really hope to see that fund do what it is meant to do.

Many members, including Bob Doris, Marie McNair and Collette Stevenson, as well as both cabinet secretaries, have mentioned the Scottish child payment and keeping 100,000 children out of

poverty. I also highlight the evidence of Professor Danny Dorling, who was mentioned by Collette Stevenson. He said that we must be careful that, when we look at the statistics, we are not just looking to move from one side of an arbitrary line to another. There needs to be more work to make sure that any analysis takes into consideration the changes that have happened, and that we do not just focus on an arbitrary line.

Bob Doris: This is not a partisan point, but does the member agree that we heard in committee that there needs to be a comparative study in England, Scotland and Wales on efforts to tackle child poverty to work out an evidence base of what is working and to adopt it on a pan-UK basis?

Roz McCall: Yes, I accept that that came up in committee. Again, I raise the point that we must be careful that we are not just looking at how we move across an arbitrary line. However, I accept that there needs to be more work and analysis.

As with all things, especially in government, it is the choices we make and the way we go about things that not only focus the mind but mean that either we meet our objectives or we do not. Governments will always have some form of financial pressure that will inhibit the way in which they take strategy forward into operational processes. No matter what political spin we apply in this chamber or what circumstances we are subjected to that affect the status quo—whether they are global, national or local—we are charged to do right by the people of Scotland.

Given that we are here to discuss the laudable goal of eradicating child poverty, we need to look at all the avenues that we can use to make that happen, and a more holistic approach must be adopted. Once again, I find myself giving my usual example of parental employment. We know that there is a tried and tested way out of poverty—not an indirect Government wealth redistribution process but a direct way to help people to help themselves. We also know that there are three main factors holding people back from achieving that, which are childcare, transport and retraining.

On childcare, the Government has highlighted the 1,140 hours, and I accept that, but the system is under a lot of pressure. We have restrictions to the Government's offer being applied in councils across the country, and we have workers not being able to access a council nursery near their place of employment. We also have some council areas postponing start dates, and wraparound care, including childminders in the PVI sector, is stretched almost to breaking point.

On transport, we have bus services being cut across rural areas. Timings of bus travel are not meeting the needs of people, as more and more flexible working becomes the norm. We have peak

fares returning for rail travellers because, at the reduced rate, people were let down by the Scottish Government's own ScotRail service so much that they could not be enticed by half-price fares.

Cuts to the college sector mean that, for many, any chances of retraining are simply beyond possible.

That is a triple whammy that is halting any progression into work. Members on the Conservative benches know that not only does having more people working help achieve the goal of reducing child poverty but, at a time when, as the motion puts it,

"public finances are under acute pressure",

it grows the economy, increases the tax intake and revenue, broadens the tax base and makes it more secure, and gives Governments additional spending for essential services in our community. It is a win-win.

The Scottish Government must take responsibility for the financial predicament that it finds itself in; accept the harsh reality, backed up by independent financial experts, that it is down to this Government's choices; shift focus to a holistic approach, including parental employment and returning empty buildings to housing stock; and actively make a difference for the children of Scotland.

The Presiding Officer: I call Shirley-Anne Somerville to wind up the debate. Could you take us to 5 pm, cabinet secretary?

16:49

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice (Shirley-Anne Somerville): I thank all members for their contributions. The programme for government shows our commitment to supporting families in Scotland and it sets out the next steps that we will take in our national mission to lift children out of poverty.

As the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government set out earlier this week, we are doing so in the context of the most severe financial challenges that the Parliament has faced in its history—challenges that are the result of failures of the previous UK Government, as the chancellor has recently stated. However, now we are told by the new Prime Minister that things will only get worse.

Despite that, the Scottish Government is building on a firm foundation. We have invested around £3 billion a year to tackle poverty, mitigate the cost of living crisis as far as we can, and invest in prevention to break the cycle of poverty. That includes the unparalleled support provided by the Scottish child payment and our five family

payments. More than 325,000 children and young people were benefiting from the Scottish child payment as of the end of June. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that, overall, low-income families in Scotland will be around £28,000 better off by the time their child turns 18 compared with families across the UK, as a result of the decisions that have been taken by this Government. That is delivery, and that is impact.

The actions set out in the programme for government build on that foundation and seek to drive progress, together with partners. We know that families will be able to thrive only if they have access to the right support at the right time. I saw the change that such support can make when I recently visited Alloa academy with the First Minister to meet young people and their families and hear more about the Clackmannanshire family wellbeing partnership. We want to work with partners, not just in Clackmannanshire but in other local authorities, to remove the barriers to progress and support the change that is needed to provide holistic support. The programme for government sets out how we will do that through our on-going work with partners and through expanding our place-based partnerships to five more areas: North Ayrshire, East Ayrshire, Perth and Kinross, Inverclyde and Aberdeen. Through those partnerships, more families will receive the support that they need when they need it.

We know that, important though that policy is, there is no silver bullet to ending child poverty in Scotland. We will only be able to do so with relentless focus, nationally and locally, and in partnership with organisations the length and breadth of the country.

The First Minister has made it clear that lifting children out of poverty is the top priority for this Government. I am pleased to say that, to drive that progress, he has decided to form a new Cabinet sub-committee on child poverty. That will ensure that the full weight and authority of the Cabinet is focused on that mission in his tenure.

By working together with the full effort of national and local government, the third sector and business, we can come together and deliver joined-up, whole-systems approaches to making that change possible. Together, we can turn the tide.

Oliver Mundell: I am a bit confused about the Cabinet sub-committee. If this issue is the Government's overarching priority, should it not be a policy priority that runs through every single portfolio? For example, is hiking rail fares for hard-pressed families not completely contrary to the things that the cabinet secretary will be setting out to do?

Shirley-Anne Somerville: With respect to Oliver Mundell, I think that there is a misunderstanding about how Cabinet sub-committees work to ensure that an extra focus on an issue is given above and beyond what already happens in Cabinet. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport has already laid out some of the reasons behind her decisions on peak rail fares.

I turn to the UK Government. Although we are determined to do as much as we can to tackle child poverty, as we always have, we need to ensure that both Governments that serve Scotland do that. To that end, I welcome the announcement from the new UK Government of a ministerial task force on child poverty, which Paul O’Kane has mentioned. Its stated intention is to

“work closely with the devolved governments”

to meet shared ambitions. I stand ready to work with the UK Government on that, and I have made that approach directly to the relevant secretaries of state in meetings.

However, I say again—this has been mentioned in the debate—that along with that strategy, the UK Government needs to take action now. Here is a quote:

“no child poverty strategy will be credible unless the two-child limit is scrapped at the Autumn Budget.”

Those are not my words, but the words of Dan Paskins, interim executive director of Save the Children UK. The new UK child poverty task force has stressed that it will listen to experts. I certainly hope that it does, but I also hope that the Government listens to experts soon and takes that action in the budget, as it has the ability to do so.

Members have gone into specifics in a number of areas. I do not have time to address them all but will endeavour to cover some of them.

Paul O’Kane mentioned modelling. The Scottish Government has published the full and detailed methodology on child poverty modelling; I invite members to review that entire document. The chair of the UK Statistics Authority described that kind of analysis as

“a reasonable way to estimate the impact of Scottish Government policies.”

I hope that that gives the member reassurance and some interesting bedtime or weekend reading, if he wants to take that further.

Many members mentioned the mitigation that the Scottish Government makes, and they were right to do so. We have spent £1.2 billion mitigating the impacts of the policies of UK Governments—Tory and Labour—whether that is the bedroom tax, which we have mitigated to assist 92,000 households this year, the benefit cap or the shortfalls in local housing allowance. We

have spent £134 million this year. That money could pay for 2,000 extra teachers or 2,000 band 5 nurses, but we are mitigating UK austerity—both Tory and Labour. That does not include the nearly £0.5 billion that we spend on the Scottish child payment, mitigating the inadequacy of universal credit. We are making that fantastic investment to protect people, but it should not be required, and the UK Government needs to pick that up at source.

Willie Rennie made a thoughtful contribution on many aspects. He is quite right that we should not celebrate the Scottish child payment and that it is a tragedy that people need it in this society. However, I am proud that we have stepped up to support those people—that is the area that we can be proud of as a Government. However, he is right to make that point. He also talked about removing barriers in relation to a number of issues, which I do not have time to get into today, but if Mr Rennie would care to discuss them further at another time, I would be happy to go through some of the points that he raised.

In closing, Pam Duncan-Glancy talked about what the previous Labour Government had done to lift people out of poverty. She was right—there were many successes in that. Do you know the downside, though? That Labour Government was followed by a Tory Government—for years. The bedroom tax and the rape clause were introduced; the working tax credits that Labour is so proud of are being scrapped. That is the union dividend: when Labour makes some progress—no matter how much—as sure as night follows day, a Tory Government comes along and blows it out of the water. Do you know what? Even when another Labour Government comes along, it will not have the bravery to take the early decisions on the bedroom tax and the rape clause to get us back to where we were before. That is the difficulty of pretending that a new Labour Government at a UK level will make the difference: the Tories will unpick its work, if any progress is made at all.

The context that we are in is important. Whether it is austerity, the impact of Brexit, the cost of living crisis or the impact of inflation on the Scottish Government’s budget—the cumulative inflation of 18.9 per cent over three years has made the situation difficult for the Government—we are continuing to do everything we can.

It would be easier if the two Governments could work together, and I hope that we do. However, as Jenny Gilruth pointed out in her opening remarks, Conservative austerity is becoming Labour austerity. That now infamous line from Anas Sarwar—

“Read my lips: no austerity under Labour”—

will continue to haunt him. It might have sounded good while he was practising it before the debate, but I can assure him and others on the Labour benches that we will continue to remind him of it—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Let us hear the cabinet secretary.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: In the eight weeks that we have had, let us look at where we have got to. The Labour Government has scrapped the universal winter fuel payment. The Labour Party, during the election, promised that it would reduce fuel bills by £300; instead, Ofgem has confirmed that bills will go up by 10 per cent this winter. I do not think that that was the change that people had in mind when they voted Labour, but it is the change that they got.

What worries me even more is what is next. Des McNulty, who used to sit in this Parliament, has been questioning the Scottish child payment. Michael Marra has, in the past, questioned free tuition fees. We have to wonder whether that is the change that Anas Sarwar was talking about yesterday.

Although this Government's programme for government sets out our next steps to provide progress in the delivery of our national mission of ending child poverty, we need that mission to be a collective one. I hope that, right across the chamber, we can—*[Interruption.]*

The Presiding Officer: Cabinet secretary, I know that you are concluding and I am loth to interrupt, but I would ask members to treat one another with courtesy and respect and to avoid intervening from a sedentary position.

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Thank you, Presiding Officer. I completely appreciate that some of these closing remarks are uncomfortable for the Labour Party—and they should be—but I believe that we can work across the chamber, across every sector and indeed across Scotland on this Government's national mission. That is what this Government is continuing to do, and I hope that members across the chamber, and others, will join us in that mission.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes the debate on the programme for government—eradicating child poverty.

Decision Time

17:01

The Presiding Officer (Alison Johnstone): There are four questions to be put as a result of today's business. I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Miles Briggs is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Maggie Chapman will fall.

The first question is, that amendment S6M-14322.2, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-14322, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the programme for government—eradicating child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

There will be a short suspension to allow members to access the digital voting system.

17:01

Meeting suspended.

17:04

On resuming—

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Miles Briggs is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Maggie Chapman will fall.

We come to the vote on amendment S6M-14322.2, in the name of Miles Briggs, which seeks to amend motion S6M-14322, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the programme for government—eradicating child poverty. Members should cast their votes now.

For

Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse)

(SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-14322.2, in the name of Miles Briggs, is: For 29, Against 91, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: I remind members that, if the amendment in the name of Paul O'Kane is agreed to, the amendment in the name of Maggie Chapman will fall.

The next question is, that amendment S6M-14322.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, which seeks to amend motion S6M-14322, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the programme for government—eradicating child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)

Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Abstentions

Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-14322.1, in the name of Paul O'Kane, is: For 21, Against 95, Abstentions 4.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The next question is, that amendment S6M-14322.3, in the name of Maggie Chapman, which seeks to amend motion S6M-14322, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the programme for government—eradicating child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)

Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)

Against

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foyso (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dowe, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on amendment S6M-14322.3, in the name of Maggie Chapman, is: For 8, Against 113, Abstentions 0.

Amendment disagreed to.

The Presiding Officer: The final question is, that motion S6M-14322, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the programme for government—eradicating child poverty, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Presiding Officer: There will be a division.

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
 Adam, Karen (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
 Adamson, Clare (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)
 Allan, Alasdair (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
 Arthur, Tom (Renfrewshire South) (SNP)
 Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
 Brown, Keith (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
 Brown, Siobhian (Ayr) (SNP)
 Burgess, Ariane (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
 Chapman, Maggie (North East Scotland) (Green)
 Coffey, Willie (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)
 Constance, Angela (Almond Valley) (SNP)
 Dey, Graeme (Angus South) (SNP)
 Don-Innes, Natalie (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)
 Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
 Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
 Dunbar, Jackie (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
 Ewing, Annabelle (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)
 Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
 Fairlie, Jim (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
 FitzPatrick, Joe (Dundee City West) (SNP)
 Forbes, Kate (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
 Gibson, Kenneth (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
 Gilruth, Jenny (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
 Grahame, Christine (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
 Gray, Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
 Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
 Harper, Emma (South Scotland) (SNP)
 Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green)
 Haughey, Clare (Rutherglen) (SNP)
 Hepburn, Jamie (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth) (SNP)
 Hyslop, Fiona (Linlithgow) (SNP)
 Kidd, Bill (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
 Lochhead, Richard (Moray) (SNP)
 MacDonald, Gordon (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
 MacGregor, Fulton (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)
 Mackay, Gillian (Central Scotland) (Green)
 Mackay, Rona (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
 Macpherson, Ben (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
 Maguire, Ruth (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
 Martin, Gillian (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
 Mason, John (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
 McAllan, Màiri (Clydesdale) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McKee, Ivan (Glasgow Provan) (SNP)
 McKelvie, Christina (Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse) (SNP) [Proxy vote cast by Jamie Hepburn]
 McLennan, Paul (East Lothian) (SNP)
 McMillan, Stuart (Greenock and Inverclyde) (SNP)
 McNair, Marie (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)
 Minto, Jenni (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)
 Nicoll, Audrey (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)
 Regan, Ash (Edinburgh Eastern) (Alba)
 Robertson, Angus (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)
 Robison, Shona (Dundee City East) (SNP)
 Roddick, Emma (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)
 Ruskell, Mark (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
 Slater, Lorna (Lothian) (Green)
 Somerville, Shirley-Anne (Dunfermline) (SNP)
 Stevenson, Collette (East Kilbride) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)
 Stewart, Kevin (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)
 Sturgeon, Nicola (Glasgow Southside) (SNP)
 Swinney, John (Perthshire North) (SNP)
 Thomson, Michelle (Falkirk East) (SNP)
 Todd, Maree (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
 Torrance, David (Kirkcaldy) (SNP)
 Tweed, Evelyn (Stirling) (SNP)
 Yousaf, Humza (Glasgow Pollok) (SNP)

Against

Baillie, Jackie (Dumbarton) (Lab)
 Baker, Claire (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
 Balfour, Jeremy (Lothian) (Con)
 Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Boyack, Sarah (Lothian) (Lab)
 Briggs, Miles (Lothian) (Con)
 Carlaw, Jackson (Eastwood) (Con)
 Carson, Finlay (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
 Choudhury, Foysol (Lothian) (Lab)
 Clark, Katy (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Cole-Hamilton, Alex (Edinburgh Western) (LD)
 Dowey, Sharon (South Scotland) (Con)
 Duncan-Glancy, Pam (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Eagle, Tim (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Findlay, Russell (West Scotland) (Con)
 Fraser, Murdo (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Golden, Maurice (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Gosal, Pam (West Scotland) (Con)
 Grant, Rhoda (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
 Greene, Jamie (West Scotland) (Con)
 Griffin, Mark (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Gulhane, Sandesh (Glasgow) (Con)
 Halcro Johnston, Jamie (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Hamilton, Rachael (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
 Hoy, Craig (South Scotland) (Con)
 Johnson, Daniel (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
 Kerr, Liam (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Lennon, Monica (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Leonard, Richard (Central Scotland) (Lab)
 Lumsden, Douglas (North East Scotland) (Con)
 Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
 McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
 McCall, Roz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 McNeill, Pauline (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Mochan, Carol (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Mountain, Edward (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Mundell, Oliver (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
 O'Kane, Paul (West Scotland) (Lab)
 Rennie, Willie (North East Fife) (LD)
 Ross, Douglas (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
 Sarwar, Anas (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Simpson, Graham (Central Scotland) (Con)
 Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Smyth, Colin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Stewart, Alexander (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
 Sweeney, Paul (Glasgow) (Lab)
 Villalba, Mercedes (North East Scotland) (Lab) [Proxy vote cast by Richard Leonard]
 Webber, Sue (Lothian) (Con)
 Wells, Annie (Glasgow) (Con)
 Whitfield, Martin (South Scotland) (Lab)
 Whittle, Brian (South Scotland) (Con)
 Wishart, Beatrice (Shetland Islands) (LD)

The Presiding Officer: The result of the division on motion S6M-14322, in the name of Jenny Gilruth, on the programme for government—eradicating child poverty, is: For 67, Against 54, Abstentions 0.

Motion agreed to,

That the Parliament notes the actions set out in the Programme for Government 2024-25 that focus on eradicating child poverty as the single greatest priority for the Scottish Government; recognises that sustained and cohesive effort is needed across all levels of government and in all parts of society to deliver on this national mission,

especially at a time when the public finances are under acute pressure after 14 years of austerity; welcomes continued investment of around £3 billion in 2024-25 to eradicate poverty, mitigate the impacts of the cost of living crisis and invest in prevention to break the cycle of poverty; notes analysis of the Child Poverty Action Group, which estimates that low-income families in Scotland will be around £28,000 better off by the time that their child turns 18 when compared to other families across the UK; further notes modelling that estimates that 100,000 children will be kept out of relative poverty this year as a result of Scottish Government policies such as the Scottish Child Payment; recognises the Scottish Government's commitment to working constructively with the UK Government to end child poverty once and for all, and agrees that the UK Government has the opportunity to lift thousands of children out of poverty in Scotland by taking action in the Autumn Budget to remove the two-child limit.

The Presiding Officer: That concludes decision time.

Meeting closed at 17:12.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* for this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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